

THE NEXT POINT

ANNUAL 2012



JESSE PENTECOST

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
The Australian Summer	5
The Golden Swing and the US Spring (Part One)	58
Davis Cup First Round	64
The Golden Swing and the US Spring (Part Two)	69
Davis Cup Quarterfinals	130
The Clay Season	139
The Grass Season	232
Interlude.....	270
The Olympic Games	21
The US Summer	301
Davis Cup Semifinals	348
The Asian Swing	352
The European Indoors	368
Davis Cup Final	404
Conclusion.....	410
Appendix A: Retiring Players.....	435
Appendix B: Great Matches	444

Copyright © Jesse Pentecost 2013

www.thenextpoint.com

Cover photo copyright: Mike Hewitt / Getty Images Europe

Introduction

The most pressing question as the 2012 men's tennis season commenced – and this was broadly the case wherever one's sympathies were directed – was whether Novak Djokovic could possibly fashion a year worthy of his 2011. (The subsidiary issue of whether this question was itself worthwhile was largely ignored.) Common sense held that he probably couldn't; seasons such as that are hard enough to put together once, let alone twice and consecutively. On the other hand, such had been the completeness of Djokovic's dominance that common sense came to sound like stodgy caution. If it was hard to imagine that he could sustain his majestic level, then it was almost as hard to believe he wouldn't.

As it happened, Djokovic finished as world number one for the second straight year, but as recently as the second last week of the season he was ranked at number two. His inhuman 2011 gave way to an entirely human 2012. But, given permissive circumstances, humanity permits us our heroism, should we rise to it. Djokovic's heroic year was at once less impressive, and more.

It was more impressive because he just narrowly overcame a group of peers nearer the peak of their powers. Roger Federer proved that even the sport's most comprehensive resume can be rendered more complete, as he equalled Pete Sampras' record of seven Wimbledon titles, surpassed the American's record for total weeks at number one, and claimed a seventeenth Major. He also established himself as the world's foremost exponent on blue clay.

As I write this introduction, in the closing days of 2012, the news has come down that Rafael Nadal has withdrawn from the 2013 Australian Open, thereby establishing the worst kind of continuity. He missed far too much of 2012 – everything after Wimbledon – through injury. The six months when Nadal was still active threaten to recede into memory, but it would be a poor summary that failed to acknowledge his dominance on clay, for the way he solved the problem of Djokovic, if indeed it needed solving, and the manner in which he won his record seventh Roland Garros. His season deserves to be remembered for more than that unprecedented upset to Lukas Rosol at Wimbledon.

2012 was, of course, an Olympic year, and the extent to which this marred or enhanced the broader season is a matter for debate. Unquestionably it shaped it. I doubt whether Andy Murray's fans could find fault with the scheduling, especially after he won the gold medal, and for the way it permitted the Scot a measure of redemption so soon after The Championships. The full measure arrived at the US Open, where he became the first British man to win a Major since Fred Perry. He is now the first British man at risk of

becoming a 'one-Slam wonder', since this depressing epithet is a wholly modern coinage. Not even Tim Henman was so bruised and abraded by the adoration of his compatriots.

If I was inclined to rank such things – and the endless popularity of list-based web content proves that to do otherwise is to be wilfully old-fashioned – then it would be tough to decide which player truly constituted the story of the year. Quaintly, if not self-defeatingly, I'm determined to avoid such contrivances, and am therefore under no obligation to measure Brian Baker's unlikely comeback against that of Tommy Haas. Both things happened, and there was always room enough to acknowledge each without deciding which was better. (It also meant I felt no compulsion to enter the fatuous debate around who was 'really' the ATP's player of the year.)

Consequently, there's plenty in the following pages about the players nearer the fringes, even if I rarely venture as far out onto the fringe as some believe I should. There have always been those who vehemently eschew the main story in order to focus on the margins, who visit The Louvre and poke around the basement feeling superior to the crowds thronging the first floor to see the lady smile. There's nothing at all wrong with that – the whole place is replete with treasures – except when they grow prescriptive about what everyone else should be looking at. Sometimes the façade of superiority collapses into a sneer. As a rule I have no time for fans whose interest in the sport ends with a particular player, but allowances should always be made for those whose interest starts with one. A love for the game has to begin somewhere, and there are worse ways to be drawn in than by admiring thoughtful young men at their best.

Although I don't wish to measure them against each other, I still maintain a mental list of the moments and stories that delight me most. Baker's comeback was indeed inspirational, and by nature I believe I'm a hard man to inspire, especially when Americans insist I should be. Radek Stepanek is another superb story, his season beginning with an audacious doubles title at the Australian Open, and ending with Davis Cup glory. Frederik Nielson and Jonathan Marray's doubles title at Wimbledon was equally memorable, especially since they achieved the impossible the hard way. The resurgence of Haas was indeed a favourite, because the German has been a favourite of mine for over a decade. His title in Halle was a highlight. Philipp Kohlschreiber's Munich title was a highlight as well, especially watching his reserve crack momentarily as he gouged out part of the centre court in his prize BMW. Jerzy Janowicz and David Ferrer desperately resuscitated a Paris Indoors that the ATP had done its best to choke the life out of. David Nalbandian proved equally merciless in dealing with a linesman at Queens. At various points throughout the year Japan hosted individual acts of greatness, from the Davis Cup heroics of Ivo Karlovic or Amir Weintraub, to Kei Nishikori's stirring title run in

Tokyo. David Goffin ended Arnaud Clement's career, then almost earned the eternal enmity of his fellow Federer fans by threatening an upset at the French Open.

In addition to Clement, the men's tour also bid farewell to Rainer Schuettler, Juan Carlos Ferrero, Andy Roddick and Fernando Gonzalez (my valedictories for these last three, such as they are, can be found in an appendix to this Annual). I'm probably forgetting others. The so-called New Balls generation is starting to look decidedly thin. Of the twelve men pictured on my official 2002 New Balls Please calendar, only Federer, Hewitt and Haas remain in frame. 2012 was also the year when their latest batch of successors – the Newest Balls – was scheduled finally to break through, but mostly didn't. It's time for another calendar, at least.

As was the case last year, the included pieces have mostly been left untouched, besides the odd touch-up to improve (or even achieve) readability. I've resisted the urge to make myself seem prescient by tweaking the few predictions I actually attempted. The aim isn't to look infallible, and getting it very wrong is part of the fun.

This volume is considerably longer than the previous one, even though it includes fewer actual articles. The reason, obviously, is that the articles are generally longer. I'm not sure whether this is a good or a bad thing. They certainly take me longer to write. I can always stave off the fear that I've merely grown long-winded by telling myself that I've got a lot to say. The number of paragraphs I've culled from each finished piece suggests this might even be true. Indeed, I suspect this paragraph could go. As ever, the moment a writer starts to talk about how long they've gone on for is a useful indication that it's time to stop.

Jesse Pentecost

Melbourne, 2012

The Australian Summer

Just an Exhibition

Abu Dhabi, First Round

The 2012 tennis season is barely hours old, and no official matches have occurred, but already David Ferrer has staged a dogged fight back, Novak Djokovic has galloped to a comfortable victory, while Gael Monfils has bounded and darted gazelle-like to an inevitable loss. So much for new beginnings. So much for my New Year's resolution to avoid animal metaphors.

Of course, Abu Dhabi is just an exhibition, although I am dissatisfied with 'exhibition' as a blanket term, since it covers too many disparate types of event. If Rafael Nadal plays a one-off match for the benefit of his foundation, for no remuneration, then that is categorically different from swanning in to the United Arab Emirates to play a couple of meaningless tune-ups for a million bucks. The events occurring the week before majors - such as Kooyong - are a slightly different matter again. Mostly what relegates these various shindigs to exhibition status is the format, since they feature tiny invitational draws. We may therefore define an exhibition as being any event that lacks ATP endorsement, with the consequence that the results do not figure on the official records and the contestants earn no ranking points. As I say, it's a capacious term, and gives the casual viewer few clues on how to approach them. Charity exhibitions have pre-decided outcomes, and are heavily laced with farce and crowd interaction. Warm-up events, on the other hand, can prove every bit as serious as an official tour match.

It is remarkable how important the ATP's imprimatur remains. This importance cannot be measured in appearance fees - although hopefully no one believes that five of the top six players are gracing Abu Dhabi out of charity - but it can be measured in effort, although the potency of this distinction has lately become diluted. If 2011 was the year of Djokovic, it was also the year of the precautionary retirement - cynics might unfairly suggest that the two are related - whereby many top players would retire from any match they no longer believed they could win, assuming they could blame it on a suitably ostentatious niggle. Thus we saw Djokovic pull out of the Cincinnati final while down a set, but one week later mount a US Open campaign about as gruelling as traversing the Kokoda Track without legs. This was by no means an isolated example. The season was littered with them, to the point that this behaviour became normalised, and to even remark on it came to seem like carping. Thus does base expediency become dignified as tactical nous.

In any case, this kind of behaviour was once a useful way of telling an exhibition from a 'real' event, since it was common at 'exos', whose organisers well understood that no player would risk injury on their behalf (although this depended on the guarantees surrounding the appearance fee). When Tsonga more or less gave up in the third set against Ferrer tonight, the immediate and classic response would be that this was fair enough: it's just an exhibition. What was more depressing, however, was how such an explanation wasn't even necessary. Giving up just looked . . . normal. This was a shame, since the match had been pretty good up until that point, especially that pivotal second set tiebreaker. Sadly, the last few games were entirely perfunctory.

Djokovic and Monfils served up more traditional exhibition fare - trading tweeners and other sundry trick-shots, as well as some truly monstered forehands - although as the world No.1 tore through that opening set it tasted more like nouveau Djokovic, with added spice. (Okay, in addition to animal ones, no more hackneyed food metaphors: they leave a bad taste in one's mouth.) Was it significant that Djokovic's first rally of the 2012 season ended with an immaculate backhand winner up the line? Time will tell. He did seem to be playing with greater pace than usual, hopefully reflecting his coach's recent comments that enhanced aggression was a goal for the coming year. We can only pray this increased pace occurs between points as well as during them. There has been plenty of discussion concerning Djokovic's motivations for this year, though I suppose limiting his inclination to dawdle before serving is too much to hope for. Let's hope it's a goal for the tour umpires, at least.

Significance without Meaning

Abu Dhabi, Semifinals

Djokovic d. Federer, 6/2 6/1

Ferrer d. Nadal, 6/3 6/2

Novak Djokovic today crushed Roger Federer in less than three quarters of an hour. David Ferrer took slightly over an hour to inflict the same treatment on Rafael Nadal. It is only Abu Dhabi, of course, and therefore only an exhibition, but for ostensibly meaningless results, they gave us plenty to think on.

Barry Cowan, holding forth at yawn-inducing length on Eurosport, declared that this result will no more trouble Federer than it will inspire Djokovic. If both were to meet in the semifinal or final in Melbourne, this encounter would figure exactly nowhere in their reckoning. Elite athletes, he insisted, are particularly good about selectively forgetting

when it suits them. He's probably right, but only to an extent. His words might have rung truer had Djokovic prevailed 6/4 7/5 or something. But a mugging this comprehensive must surely resonate at some level, especially if Djokovic pulls ahead early in any theoretical future encounters.

Once Federer had finished apologising to the crowd - and by extension to the organisers who've paid a fortune for him to show up - he was willing to admit that exhibition or not, being on the receiving end of so severe a hiding was 'uncomfortable'. He was forthright in his praise of Djokovic, and rightly so. Perhaps it was the near-total lack of pressure, but I can't recall Djokovic playing this well even last year. It was a level that will perhaps be familiar to anyone who has watched the pros practice against each other. The most impressive set of tennis I've ever watched was between Stefan Koubek and Max Mirnyi on an outside court a few days before the Australian Open about ten years ago, conducted with a degree of ferocity and velocity neither player ever brought to an actual match. Djokovic played like that today. We could say that Federer let him, but I'm not convinced the Swiss had much say in the matter. Certainly Djokovic's reassuring admission that the result merely reflected his having an extra match under his belt sounded hollow. If the Serb can sustain this level in tournament play, then last year will come to seem less of a feast than an appetiser.

Ferrer's victory over Nadal was arguably more interesting through being less freakish. Much has been made of Nadal's tender shoulder, but it was never a factor. The real issue was his backhand, and the genuine interest in this match lay in its strong connection to Nadal's other serious losses in the last few months. I speak namely of the US Open final (to Djokovic), the Tokyo final (to Murray), and his loss to Federer at the World Tour Finals. In every case the world No.2 was completely shut out of the match by having his backhand pressed until it broke.

Ferrer's tactic tonight was precisely the same. Nearly everything was directed to the backhand, and despite a few frustrated winners, it obligingly fell apart, either through basic error or by falling short. Nadal's forehand was only brought into play when Ferrer chose to do so, at which point the world No.5 would strike hard and almost invariably catch Nadal off guard. On the few occasions when Nadal gained control of the rally and lined up a forehand he wanted, he was under sufficient pressure to execute that he pulled the trigger either too early or too hard. If Ferrer could lay a racquet on it, he would adroitly redirect the ball back to Nadal's backhand, and continue pressing until either an error or a short ball was forthcoming. It was a perfect blueprint of how to play Nadal on a hardcourt. All it requires is a rock-solid technique, nimble feet, and the patience of a saint. And an exo.

Stern, Assured and Aromatic

Brisbane, First Round

(8) Tomic d. Benneteau, 6/2 4/6 7/5

Baghdatis d. Harrison, 7/6 6/4

Today produced mixed results for the scourge of troubled youths in Brisbane. Bernard Tomic showed a stern and rare manliness in overcoming Julien Benneteau in three sets. He was unstoppable through the first set, and largely incapable in the second, when Benneteau lifted, although I wouldn't want to imply that the Frenchman therefore lifted very high. Breaks were traded in the decider, but Tomic's stony and vaguely autistic impassiveness looked set to carry the day. Match points were discarded with stoic abandon, until Benneteau grew offended at such profligate waste and chose to intervene, realising that he alone had the power to end this thing. Tomic looked on with rugged and dim aloofness, like a latter-day Marlboro Man, daring Benneteau to gift him another point. Benneteau obliged, and then obliged again.

Meanwhile Ryan Harrison went down swinging against Marcos Baghdatis, although it might be fairer to say Baghdatis went up swinging. Either way, there was plenty of swinging (and the Australian leg of the season hasn't even been christened a 'swing' yet, thank god). It was tremendously entertaining, and Harrison's serve is a legitimate weapon, but it was a match he really needed to win. Baghdatis probably hasn't received the memo – they still have memos, right? – but the Cypriot has devolved into one of those players whose function is to provide a breakthrough win for the up-and-comer (when he isn't wrecking a top player's day). Five years ago Baghdatis was the up-and-comer, and plenty of veterans obligingly did the same for him. It's time to pay it forward.

Doha, First Round

(2) Federer d. Davydenko, 6/2 6/2

Having failed to justify his appearance fee at that 'just an exhibition' in Abu Dhabi last week, where he conceded two matches in straight and noisome sets, Roger Federer has commenced his Doha title defence in far less putrid form. He looks a more assured, and aromatic, player than last week.

Before his fans get ahead of themselves, however, it's important to bear in mind that Nikolay Davydenko looks a different player from those Federer faced last week. Sadly,

Davydenko is also a different player from the one who fell to Federer in last year's final, let alone the one who *defeated* Federer and Nadal here two years ago. Although it is otherwise inconsequential, Doha provides a useful chart of Davydenko's recent decline, which shows no signs of being arrested. Indeed, the Russian's swan dive into irrelevance appears to be accelerating, having attained a velocity that could well prove terminal. Still, Federer's serve and forehand have seemingly returned to the transcendent levels we saw in London.

Good Clean Fun

'Watch Australia's Lleyton Hewitt take on China's finest, tonight at the Hopman Cup!' implored my television, via a promo pregnant with subtext. The subtext read that Hewitt is no longer Australia's finest, and that China's finest – Wu Di – is ranked 421, and that the Hopman Cup field is pretty weak this year.

The Hopman Cup is a strange affair, one that excels in spite of its format, although it is helped by its scheduling. As an actual tournament, it is almost entirely pointless. (Even after a decade of watching it, I still only ever know who the qualifying finalists are when the commentators tell me. Apparently France has now qualified.) I am not convinced the participants have much riding on the outcome either way. They're here for match play in singles, and tend to treat even live mixed doubles rubbers with a practiced and professional levity. Each tie thus lapses from semi-seriousness into semi-'entertainment'. No opportunity is missed to ask the players how many times they've played mixed doubles before. We at home are then invited to gasp and titter when they answer 'never'. Believe me, this never ever gets old. It's something to ruminate on as we then watch totally inexperienced mixed doubles players play mixed doubles.

So far this week, across all four tournaments presently underway, the strongest impression has been of rust. It is ever thus in the first week of the year, notwithstanding the lamented brevity of the off-season (otherwise known as 'December'). The Hopman Cup celebrates this rustiness, and gussies it up with an insistently charming informality. So if it's meaningless, it is at least engagingly so, and if the standard is invariably deflated, at least it's all in good fun.

Some stray observations from the week so far:

- The adidas and Yonex kits are generally improved from last year. The exception is the orange and yellow adidas ensemble that looks like a phoenix falling into an exploding star.

- Grigor Dimitrov has gained muscle, confidence, a deeper scowl and greater weight on his first serve. His movement has improved, but his backhand remains weak until he attempts a winner, when it becomes erratic. His passing shots are also unadventurous, as is his return of serve.
- Fernando Verdasco maintained a position in the top ten for two years courtesy of a monster forehand and a magnificently rigid faux-mo. He shaved his head last year, and now his forehand cannot find the court. Coincidence?
- Paul McNamee maintains an affable presence in the commentary booth, generally throwing in enough factual inaccuracy to keep things entertaining (Memphis and San Jose are *not* played directly before the US Open). He is not above casual racism, either: 'I'm sure being Chinese he knows all about gambling.'
- The Hyundai Hopman Cup is proudly supported by Hyundai, among about five hundred other sponsors (not to mention Hyundai). No opportunity is avoided to list them all (Hyundai). Each nation's team even has its own sponsor. The Australian team is sponsored by KFC, which perhaps explains why Jarmila Gajdošová now has the top speed and turning circle of an ox-drawn steam roller. In the process of being double-bagelled by Marion Bartoli, she frequently gave up on pursuing her opponent's shots, and instead commenced her usual routine of whining soulfully at her box before the ball even landed.

As for China's finest, he was eventually ground away by Australia's Lleyton Hewitt, as you would expect when the world No.421 encounters the No.188. They looked to be hitting the ball well at times, but appearances are of course deceiving, especially lacking perspective. I switched over to Brisbane, where Radek Stepanek and Alexandr Dolgoplov were duking it out, *mano-a-weirdo*. The Hopman Cup might insist with all its heart that a tennis event can be tremendous fun, but over in Brisbane they were demonstrating that when the tennis is sufficiently fun on its own, the event itself doesn't have to be on their behalf.

Bold Predictions

Brisbane, Quarterfinals

(1) Murray d. Baghdatis, 6/2 6/2

(8) Tomic d. Istomin, 6/3 7/6

About five years ago, in the grip of that special insanity called adolescence, a fourteen-year-old Bernard Tomic predicted with unabashed solemnity that he would claim the calendar Grand Slam and the top ranking by the age of eighteen. Forgive him: he was young, and who among us did not make boasts as deluded in their youth? The difference was that Tomic has been hyped extravagantly in his home country since an early age, to an extent surpassed only by Richard Gasquet. Whereas our blithe teenage boasts were made to friends, and thus stopped there, Tomic made his to the largest newspaper in Australia. Consequently, they've stuck. As with countless unrealised doomsdays, his eighteenth birthday came and went, and keen onlookers were intrigued to discover that he had won no Slams, and that his ranking was somewhere below 200. The earth has completed its orbit once since then, with the miraculous result that Tomic is a year older. He still has no Majors – it turns out they're fairly elusive – but his ranking has soared to No.42. (Some will know this as the answer to the question of life, the universe and everything. Others won't, which is their loss.) He is rising fast.

Being older, and apparently more mature, Tomic has since distanced himself from those earlier predictions. Today during their Brisbane coverage, Channel 7 featured him in one of those lethally inconsequential fluff pieces they air between matches so that the presenters can have their frightening smiles re-affixed off-camera. It showed Tomic toiling hard in the gym, encouragingly focussing on exactly the things he should be focussing on: explosive movement and fast-twitch response. Also encouragingly, he conceded that it is only a matter of time until his peers figure out his strange game, and that he is constantly adding new elements in anticipation of this. He went on to praise the top three. He then revealed that he intends on breaking into the top ten this year, and on winning his first major. Happily, his newfound maturity saw him admit that he might not actually win a Major in 2012, and that he is willing to wait until next year. In other words, Tomic's expectations have grown markedly less crazy, but that doesn't mean they're now realistic. Admitting that he was unlikely to surpass Federer's haul of 16 Majors, he graciously confessed that he be happy with 'only three or four'. This will presumably come as a relief to the rest of the tour.

Today Tomic overcame Uzbekistan's Denis Istomin in straight sets, which to my knowledge has never been regarded as a key indicator of Slam-worthiness. Now that tennis has returned to Channel 7, the local broadcaster has resumed its practice of placing a tiny Australian flag next to the local players' names, in the probably justified hope that this will make them more likeable. The other players don't get a little flag, since all foreign countries are apparently mostly alike. To ram this home, the camera kept focussing on Alexandr Dolgoplov watching Istomin from the stands. John Fitzgerald suggested that Dolgoplov was watching Istomin because 'they hail from the same part of the world', notwithstanding that Ukraine and Uzbekistan do not share a border. The idea that the pair might be friends was not aired. Are foreigners even capable of friendship?

Anyway, Tomic will face Andy Murray in the semifinals, a man who has forgotten more about being overdue to win a Major than even Tomic might ever learn. Murray was frighteningly complete in overcoming Marcos Baghdatis. He hadn't been this complete when he snuck past Baghdatis back in Tokyo, but he had been in destroying Nadal in the final of that event. Today looked like that. He won the first point with a backhand struck so hard that Baghdatis didn't even move to it, despite the ball nearly hitting him in the leg. Wondrously, the Scot's forehand was even better.

For all that form in the lead-up tournaments means little for most Majors – and even less at the Australian Open – it was the kind of performance that will compel the other top players to take note. If they don't, they are bound to be reminded of it upon arriving in Melbourne, and hourly after that. Cast your mind back to 2009, when Murray cleaned up in Doha, and was immediately installed as the favourite ahead of Djokovic (defending champion), Nadal (world No.1), and Federer (Roger Federer). In any case, preparing for the Australian Open has not been Murray's problem of late. Ending it has been.

Regardless, expect an entertaining match against Tomic tomorrow, in which the Australian will likely discover that some players have figured out his weird game much quicker than others.

Miniature Disco Balls

Hopman Cup, 2012

As a high-profile exhibition tournament conducted a fortnight before the season's first Major, the Hopman Cup juggles the luxury of an invitational draw with the limitations imposed by the high number of alternative, officially-sanctioned events running in the

same week. They can have any player they want, but the pickings might be slim. Coupled with the nation-based mixed team format, these factors invariably result in a broad cross-section of players, reflecting diverse rankings and abilities. The desire to have, say, Li Na in attendance carries with it the reality that China has no male player of comparable stature. Consequently, a worldwide audience has been introduced to Wu Di, ranked No.421, as have his loftily-ranked opponents. The Danish contingent was similarly comprised: what tournament is going to turn down Caroline Wozniacki, even if she arrives packaged with the obscure yet charming Frederik Nielsen (ranked No.236)?

To the Hopman Cup's credit, it never tries to downplay the 'lesser' players. Even in very strong years – both Andy Murray *and* Novak Djokovic turned up in 2011 – the event devotes considerable energy and airtime to showcasing both up-and-comers and perennial journeymen. Occasionally the former category yields gold, as in 2001 when the great Martina Hingis was paired with a largely unknown 19-year-old called Roger Federer. Paradorn Srichaphan's introduction proved similarly auspicious, as did Jelena Dokic's, among others. This year's 'find' – at least far as the broader public is concerned – was Grigor Dimitrov. Naturally, anyone reading a tennis site is probably familiar with Dimitrov already, but the Hopman Cup is nothing if not broadly popular. (The frequent crowd shots suggest that most of those in attendance are retirees, and it is doubtful whether many of them knew much about Bulgaria's greatest male player a week ago. I suspect many still cannot locate it on a map.) Furthermore, it has given the public the chance to see Dimitrov ply his trade against several top-ten players, which turned out to be a fine opportunity for everyone to get cheerfully acquainted.

Dimitrov plied admirably against Tomas Berdych, whom he had actually beaten in their only previous meeting, and then more scratchily in overcoming Nielson. It was against Mardy Fish that he truly excelled, punishing the world No.8 6/2 6/1 in under an hour. For the wrong reasons, this is the match that is fated to be remembered, mostly due to Fish's boorishness. Aside from the protagonists themselves, no one knows exactly what was said between Fish and Dimitrov after their singles match, or during the subsequent mixed doubles tie. Both men have since maintained a raffish coyness under delicate questioning. Neil Harman put it to Fish via Twitter, but was rebuffed offhandedly. Fish is now crooning from the *ATP Media Relations Songbook*, insisting that Dimitrov is a great talent and has a bright future, artlessly glossing the fact that he'd looked quite eager to abbreviate that future just hours earlier. Pat Cash, who'd commentated on the match, later offered his opinion that Fish's tirade owed mostly to sour grapes at losing so badly. Matt Cronin then upbraided Cash on Twitter, demanding why the Australian felt the need to comment at all, given he hadn't heard precisely what was said. In other words, the teacup can no longer contain the tempest it spawned.

Regarding the last point, I must ask why Cash *shouldn't* offer his opinion. Indeed, given the Australian's history of, and reputation for, effortless controversy, who really expected him not to? As a former great, it's not as though he harbours any concern at upsetting Fish. And nor, by Cash's lofty standards, did he essay anything especially contentious. Does anyone realistically believe Fish would have acted the way he did had he been *winning* two and one? All it has really done is overshadow Dimitrov's performance, which was almost flawless. A capricious god would have them meet in the first round of the Australian Open.

Positive, aggressive and the reigning Wimbledon champion, Petra Kvitova is arguably the No.1 the WTA craves. In any case, assuming she maintains her current form in Melbourne, she is almost certainly the one it is going to get. She coasts a bare hundred points adrift of Wozniacki at No.2. Thus her pairing with Tomas Berdych this week saw them first awarded the top seeding, then subsequently the title. In between they beat everyone, including a reasonable French team in the final. Berdych and Gasquet fought out a skilful and entertaining first set, until the tiebreaker, at which point Berdych interleaved unreturnable serving with unservable returning. Gasquet alternated frustration and resignation, and couldn't manage a point. The Czech moved ahead in the second set, blasting to 5/1, until Gasquet suddenly ascended to that rarefied locale he fleetingly visits, in which he cannot miss no matter how hard he swings. He fought back to 5/4, before Berdych closed it out. Both men should take much from the encounter, though only one of them will take the weird trophy home. Speaking of which, it turns out a diamond-encrusted tennis ball sounds classy in theory, but in practice looks much like a miniature disco ball. Still, the Czechs seemed pleased enough, doubtless envisaging many happy hours constructing tiny *Saturday Night Fever* dioramas. Or perhaps I'm projecting.

Acts of Heroism, Acts of Mercy

Chennai, Final

(3) Raonic d. (1) Tipsarevic, 6/7 7/6 7/6

Chennai was won by Milos Raonic, who overcame a couple of transient top-tenners in the final two rounds. In neither the semifinal against Nicolas Almagro nor in the final against Janko Tipsarevic did the Canadian drop serve. To be fair, he didn't manage to break serve in the final, either, although one should not therefore assume that the encounter had the contour or flavour of an Ivo Karlovic production. Raonic created plenty of chances, and Tipsarevic fought with the determination and skill we should expect from

the world No.9. It was a gripping final, and a deserved finale for a tournament invariably overshadowed by its peers in Doha, Brisbane and Perth.

Tipsarevic has now fallen to 2-6 in ATP finals, but for first the time we can safely assert that there was no shame in losing. He performed mightily in merely making it close, but when a fellow like Raonic serves at 73%, and unleashes almost nine entire games worth of aces (35 in total), there's only so much you can do. That kind of security on serve encourages a guy to cut loose on his return games – *dans la manière de Sampras* – and Raonic did not hold back, lashing lustily at any forehand he could lay a racquet on. Fearing that the tournament had not yet received its moneys-worth, Tipsarevic then retaped his feet and won the doubles event. Raonic was already bound for Melbourne. Both retaping and plane-boarding were dutifully relayed via Twitter, providing further comfort to anyone worried the medium wasn't ideally suited to the utterly mundane. The most interesting thing a tennis player can do is play tennis, and it remains a large mercy that they haven't yet found a way to use social media while doing so.

Brisbane, Final

(1) Murray d. (3) Dolgoplov, 6/1 6/3

When they do achieve this synergy, Alexandr Dolgoplov will perhaps be among the first to exploit it. Thankfully he waited until he'd left Pat Rafter Arena before firing up his mobile phone, although he subsequently only reiterated what he'd already told the crowd, which is that he was sorry for playing such a 'boring' match, but that he'd been protecting his leg and had only taken to the court to satisfy a packed house. Put that way, his abject loss was actually heroic, an act of consummate martyrdom.

Andy Murray, whose victory was merely routine, waxed studious in praising his new coach ('Mr Lendl'), and hit all his marks in singing the praises of all interested parties. Given that top tennis players no longer proffer anything truly controversial, the main interest now lies in confirming whether they've said all the right things in the right way and with precisely the right emphasis. Alas, Mr Murray was impeccable. The pitchforks remained sheathed. That's right, they make sheaths for pitchforks now.

Doha, Final

(3) Tsonga d. (4) Monfils, 7/5 6/3

The Doha final was arguably the most atmospheric of the weekend, although this owed less to the crowd or the tennis, and more to the roiling fog that several times disrupted play. I don't think I've seen that before. Otherwise the match played out as you'd expect

it might, given that Jo-Wilfried Tsonga is overall a superior player to Gael Monfils, especially in finals. Monfils moves to a ghastly 4-12 in deciding matches. Amassing a record like that requires a special variety of consistency. Today he took ample care to ensure the aggressive virtuosity with which he'd dismantled Viktor Troicki and Rafael Nadal was nowhere in evidence. It probably didn't (or did) help that his elaborate preparation for the final consisted of retweeting pretty much any bozo that asked him to, for no discernible benefit at all.

Tsonga, once he'd endured a characteristically sluggish start, looked exactly like the second most in-form player of the past three months, which is what he has been. It naturally didn't hurt that the *most* in-form player withdrew in the semifinals. But other than a strange loss to Sam Querrey in Valencia back in October, Tsonga hasn't lost to anyone besides Roger Federer since Shanghai, and has proved that in some cases the vanishingly brief off-season can prove helpful, by not rupturing momentum. He will be dangerous in Melbourne, where he has already enjoyed definitive success. His odds – currently a generous 16-1 – may well shorten considerably over the coming week. Whatever figure they land on, no top player will fancy Tsonga in their quarter.

The Elementalists

Australian Open Qualifying, Day One

Kooyong, Day One

Like the scarred face of a basalt cliff, tennis in Melbourne today was destined to be shaped indelibly by the vast frictions of air and water. The forecast was for strong winds and showers, and to be fair there were a number of showers laced amongst the rolling storms. In all, a typical midsummer day, assuming you live in England, where weather is a penance. Still, given that the storms were also relieved by brilliant sunshine, we could say that it was a typical Melbourne day. Melbourne sneers at the cliché of four seasons in one day: why take an entire day when you can cram it all into recurring ten minute periods? Shine or rain, the constant was the inconstant wind, pulsing and raging as it pushed heroic landscapes of cloud across the sky.

When a large portion of your field of vision is in motion, the mind plays deft tricks in its endeavour to compensate. Anyone who has idled beside a vast river – such as the Amazon or the Meekong – can attest to this, to the way the river banks seem to flow in the opposite direction to the water. Glancing above the juvenile eucalypts dotting the outer grounds of Melbourne Park, the skyscrapers of downtown are clearly visible against the flowing and tumbling sky. Immense banks of cloud are flowing too rapidly to the

right. Perspective tilts worryingly, as the buildings crawl gradually left. Reason quickly intervenes, reminding me that buildings don't generally move like that. So my mind offers another, more mundane explanation: I must be drunk (notwithstanding my mostly successful New Year's resolution to consume less whisky before 10am). Or perhaps I have an inner ear infection. The experience has left me queasy. The only solution is to keep my eyes down

The ground crews, toiling at minimum-wage intensity, are displaying a similar inclination. So long as the rain stays its hand, the wind is actually helpful. In only a fraction of an hour – perhaps 5/6ths – the courts are useably dry. With their eyes thus affixed on the surface, the staff appear oblivious to the storm clouds closing, and thus to the Sisyphean shape their day is to take. By 11am play is set to commence. Then the rain returns, heavier than before, though it's soon augmented by hail. The wind gains force and the thunder booms. This might *conceivably* be called a shower, in biblical times or the monsoon belt. A chain link barricade collapses beside me. We all jump, apart from the portly woman to my right, who wears her obesity heavily, in the American fashion. Her girth is somehow exceeded by her capacity to be personally affronted by the weather, and she curses with great fluency.

As the downpour abates I climb to the top of Court Three and survey the grounds. It occurs to me that these cobalt courts are displayed at their greatest advantage in Australian sunlight, when they mirror the endless sky. There are certainly surfaces that match the crackle of a sweeping downpour or an onerous sifting drizzle, but not these. At their best they evoke oases in the immense heat. Today the courts look just like disused swimming pools.

Kooyong is no great distance from Melbourne Park as the crow flies – or as the storm cloud scuds – and therefore tastes the same weather. The difference is that today's matches at Kooyong mean little, while for the Australian Open qualifiers they mean everything. Another hour and a half passes, replete with weather and sunlight and giant squeegees pushing moisture about. Players actually appear on court, gazing amiably at each other but nervously at the sky, and the trees whipping fitfully. The rain, it turns out, had been protecting them from the startlingly changeable breeze. The matches at Kooyong are thus not only meaningless, but almost entirely useless, since it is debatable how valuable a practice match played in a gale can be. I recall Pete Sampras beating Scott Draper in similar conditions a decade ago, and remarking afterwards that he would never practice on days like that. Certainly Jo-Wilfried Tsonga looks willing to call it off today, notwithstanding that he won Doha in a pea soup fog just four days ago. He falls quickly to Jürgen Melzer. Both players look wryly amused.

Here at Melbourne Park, play is actually happening. However, I am quickly reminded that these guys aren't qualifying because they're the world's best, and that a large part of what has hitherto curtailed their journey up the rankings is an inability to perform in adverse conditions. In other words, the weather clearly isn't helping. The capacity to deal with it is broadly determined by experience. This is part of what makes Qualifying so intriguing, the way it is a snapshot of so many divergent career paths. There are the youths just passing through on their way up (although this year these are harder to discern, whereas last year both Grigor Dimitrov and Milos Raonic stood out). There are the veterans on their way down, and out. And there are the guys who seem to be here every year (where's Alex Bogomolov?). The wherewithal to cope with the mounting pressure wrought by constant swirling tosses and shanked groundstrokes is proving decisive. Few of the youngsters can resist a tendency towards extroverted despondency. This is their big chance, and it wasn't meant to be like this. I have yet to pass a court without someone gesturing histrionically, elaborate mimes and riffs on the single theme of wind.

Disconcerted, Amir Weintraub opts for a safe approach, seeking to limit the weather's role by rolling his first serve in. He seems to be landing plenty, but his opponent tees off, and it's a rout. The Israeli has climbed about a hundred places since last year, when he scraped into qualifying as an alternate. Sadly, the result this year is the same. I miss most of the second set bagel - I cannot say if there was a health issue - but see him leaving the court. He looks numb. No player has gone into greater detail on the trials of subsisting in the Challenger hinterlands, and every one of the miles Weintraub has pointlessly travelled to be here sits heavily. Perhaps he *is* hurt. Meanwhile, Ricardas Berankis moves through safely, courtesy of quick feet and compact strokes. A year ago he was the highest-ranked of the much-lauded new guard, but this time around he's the only one of them denied direct entry. Conditions or not, he is a class above his opposition. He plays safe - up and down, mostly - which is the way to play on a day like today. I won't pretend it is exciting, though.

In general the veterans are more resigned to conditions. Why some of them are resigned to their fate is a decent question, though. Eleven years ago Arnaud Clement made the final at the Australian Open. He is now 34, and has lost in the first round of qualifying. Commentating in Doha last week, Robbie Koenig countered the constant calls for Davydenko to quit by pointing out the Russian earned over \$600,000 last year, and asking what he might possibly do that was more worthy of his time. I suppose we can make a similar case for Clement, although on a more modest scale. In any case, he falls to Bjorn Phau, another veteran, who has made long career out of qualifying. Based on the set I watch, it is a phenomenally dull encounter, with both players under-powered

and error-prone. I am surprised to note Clement has not entered the doubles, since this discipline has proved fundamental to his longevity.

Rainer Schuettler also reached the final here (in 2003), and at 35 is the oldest man in the draw. Like Peter Luczak still toiling away on Court Three, Schuettler maintains an evergreen demeanour, but two decades of water, air and sun has further hardened a face that was never soft. He is stern in seeing off Chris Guccione in an inevitable pair of tiebreaks. The standard here is higher, although it takes a seeming eternity to get going. They trade breaks in the second set, and we all gasp at the momentary thrill. Otherwise the serve dominates, largely owing the quality of the Australian's serving and returning: enormous and execrable respectively. Nor should we overlook Guccione's proven capacity to fold in the tiebreaks. Schuettler, as he has for well over a decade, stands indefatigable in the face of the elements, and makes enough of his chances when they finally arrive.

Total Saturation

Australian Open Qualifying, Day Two

To live in Australia is to be never entirely free of sport, unless you are maniacally bent on avoiding it. This is especially true of Melbourne, which rightly prides itself on being the sporting capital of a sports-mad nation, and where regard for football transcends mere love, spiralling upwards and outwards into something closer to mass-psychosis. Furthermore, being an essentially insecure country, we are inclined to look outward, and maintain a more-than-casual appreciation of the sports prevailing in the mother countries. Nevertheless, it is in summer that the flame of interest flares blindingly, and even those un-Australians determined to eschew all sports can no longer shield their eyes from the blaze. Sport, suddenly, is ubiquitous.

Certainly it's everywhere in our house. My son's birthday is in early December – he has just turned three – and he already associates getting older with total sport saturation. He intercepts me as I come downstairs this morning, wielding his cricket bat and warning me to stay out of the television-room: 'I'm Roger Federer, and I'm playing golf on my basketball court.' He's either a genius – *of course he is* – or he has anticipated the next craze to sweep the globe. He is surely right that Federer would be the ideal front-man to sell it. I promise to put it to Roger if I bump into him today at Melbourne Park.

As it happens, I don't run into Federer, although I do come across Nikolay Davydenko, thrashing balls on a remote back-court under the baleful gaze of his brother, Eduardo.

The overwhelming impression of Davydenko on television is that he is diminutive, but in person he's not especially tiny (although his brother is). Eduardo also maintains a pretty terrible beard, though since that is all that protects us from his perpetual scowl, I suppose we should be grateful. As ever with Davydenko, watching him hit from extreme close range is a transfigurative experience, especially on the practice court where he still strikes the ball the way he used to in competition. He remains categorically superior to all the qualifiers toiling away on the surrounding courts, and so it's a sad thought that his current career trajectory might see him rank among them before long.

I glance around at a sudden commotion, whereupon I am frozen by an endless tan and miles of teeth at eye-level, followed by the realisation that Ana Ivanovic is as unmanfully flawless from two feet away as she is when viewed remotely. All eyes follow her, including those of the Davydenko brothers. They are the only ones who don't look impressed, although I suppose being Russian millionaires they don't find Slavic goddesses all that hard to come by. 'One last point!' instructs Davydenko to his hitting partner, Blaz Kavcic. He wins a fine final rally with a savage forehand pass.

Yesterday's ferocious wind has largely calmed, although today's cloud cover is more dismally comprehensive. There will be no storms, but at least the storms blew away quickly, even if they were replaced by new ones just as play was due to resume. Today's clouds aren't going anywhere, and the drizzle might turn out to be more frustrating as a consequence. Even before play was stopped, conditions were heavy. Now, with everyone milling about awkwardly beneath improvised cover, they're a bummer.

Before play is stopped, Florent Serra and Robbi Ginepri make it through a whole set of their first round qualifying match, and an engaging set it is. It's tough on the still-coming-back Ginepri to draw Serra first up, since they're both frankly too good to be languishing outside the top hundred, and either man would fancy his chance against anyone else in the field. Both are aggressive, with Serra superior on serve and the American striking more clean winners. Serra, on the other hand, is forcing more errors. The standard is admirable in the conditions.

Serra is that specific, perpetually-rumpled incarnation of Frenchman, in appearance something of a sewer rat, and given to offhand shrugs and mordant muttering. Unusually among male pros, he will generally reuse the ball from a missed first serve for the second. At one point he frames a second serve onto his own service line, has the good grace to look embarrassed, but then demands that ball back for the next point. A sense of poetry dictates that he then blasts an ace with it; comedy requires another

fault. Sadly, he does neither, and Ginepri takes the point. They gain the tiebreak, and suddenly the American inexplicably goes away.

Meanwhile Conor Niland and Stephane Bohli grind out about five games on serve – what little I see is not inspiring, though it seems character-building – while Thiemo de Bakker and Dustin Brown are locked in a titanic and enjoyable tussle nearby. The much-fancied Malek Jaziri is already down a set and a break, which is only slightly less noteworthy than his decision to kit out in an identical shade of orange to the officials. The drizzle intensifies, and the umpires suspend play with ragged cohesion. I huddle in the lee of a temporary stand with Carlos Bernardes, hoping it will blow over. It shapes to, but re-intensifies. The ball-kids receive a master class on the manifold intricacies of court-drying. I kid you not.

The concern is occasionally voiced that electronic review systems result in a deskilling of officials, that too great a reliance on machinery only dulls an umpire's judgement, sapping his or her conviction. Days like today are a useful corrective to such a view. There is certainly no technology on offer in qualifying – Rainer Schuettler remonstrated about this at some length – and there are plenty of top shelf umpires on hand, honing their skills. The Serra-Ginepri match is governed by Enric Molina, while Gremelmayr's snooze-fest is overseen by Pascal Maria. They look as sharp as they need to be, though Molina does miss one clanger. I confer briefly with Serra's coach, who amazingly agrees that his player was cheated.

Play resumes eventually, but Ginepri's focus proves unsustainable. Serra gains the break in mid-set, and rides it to the end. Niland, for whatever reason, is never quite the same player after the rain delay. Most of the games are still tight, but Bohli is now winning more of them. De Bakker drops the second set, and he and the arch-Teutonic Brown fight out a tight, serve-dominated final set. The Dutchman wins it 8/6. Jaziri is gone.

Luck of the Draw: Australian Open 2012

For those men currently battling the elements and, sporadically, each other in the Australian Open qualifying tournament, the news that two among their number have drawn Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal in the opening round of the main draw must inspire both consternation and anticipation. Other potential opponents include Steve Darcis and Olivier Rochus. With due acknowledgement that they have no choice in the matter, it remains a nice question who they would rather face. While either Belgian is a winnable proposition, they'd be forgoing a prime time match on centre court, facing an

all-time great. On balance, I suppose they'll take the fighting chance at a win. Copping a hiding they can bore their grandchildren with is one thing, but one has to earn a crust.

Assuming these theoretical qualifiers overcome Federer and Nadal – surely a safe assumption to make – and that this victory propels each to four further wins apiece, then they will collide in the semifinals. This is because, for the first time in almost seven years, Federer and Nadal have been drawn in the same half at a major. This stat is less astounding than it seems at first glance, since they spent about five years at Nos.1 and 2. Perhaps more interestingly, this marks the first time in seven majors that Federer and Novak Djokovic have been drawn in separate halves, a configuration whose relentless reoccurrence was coming to seem almost inevitable, and therefore nourishing for those convinced the whole thing is rigged. To what end I cannot say, since of all the ways one might pursue world domination, staging endless Federer-Nadal finals seems like a roundabout method, but each to their own. I have already heard it said that these shady powers-that-be doctored this draw specifically to throw everyone off the scent. (Those dastards.) If that was indeed the goal, then they'll have to try harder. Conspiracy theorists are by nature hard to deflect, and even harder to reason with, since their cherished notions are too often arrived at unreasonably.

Anyway, a quick QA on the draw, because a QA is a clever way to gussy-up point-form, for when you're too lazy to continue with actual paragraphs.

Q: Who has the most difficult draw?

A: Paolo Lorenzi, who will face Djokovic first up.

Q: Which of the *top* players has the most difficult draw?

A: Andy Murray

Q: Will there be a surprise semifinalist?

A: If there is, it will be a surprise. I won't spoil it by telling you who it is.

Q: Does Andy Roddick have any chance of winning?

A: It's hard to say a player has no chance of winning, except in Roddick's case. I suppose nothing is impossible (and according to the miracle of advertising, impossible is nothing). After all, even Thomas Johansson won here. Roddick winning is rather less likely than that.

Q: So who *will* win?

A: It seems unlikely that you're reading a site like this and haven't made up your own mind. I'll just say that any bet against Djokovic is a brave one.

Q: Which are the pick of the first round matches?

A: Tomic v Verdasco (very winnable for the Australian); Haase v Roddick; Troicki v Ferrero; Melzer v Karlovic; Wawrinka v Paire (winnable for the Frenchman); maybe Dimitrov v Chardy. The more able hardcourters seem to be scattered quite evenly through the draw (probably because it's *rigged*). Assuming these guys survive their openers, expect things to really get going in the second and third rounds.

Sizeable Hurdles

Auckland, Final

(1) Ferrer d. Rochus, 6/3 6/4

It is a criminal offence to discuss Olivier Rochus without mentioning how tall he isn't – listen to the commentary accompanying any of his matches for clear proof – so I won't endeavour to try. However, punning on said deficiency is merely considered bad taste, so I cannot promise anything there. He came up short against David Ferrer in the Auckland final today – *you were warned* – and thus falls to 2-8 in tour finals. 2'8" is, by sheer coincidence, exactly half Rochus' height, regardless of what the official figures say, and is somewhat lower than a standard tennis net. There is probably a complicated equation waiting to be devised measuring tennis skill against height, which will legitimately demonstrate that Oli Rochus ranks among the most skilful players ever to play the sport. We are left to wonder what he might have achieved had he chosen his dimensions more thoughtfully.

His path to the Auckland final was hardly straight, though it did lead him through the two most entertaining matches of the tournament. Rochus is a gifted shotmaker, and so watching him overcome equally gifted shotmakers in Philipp Kohlschreiber and Benoit Paire was a rare treat. Shots, you may be sure, were made. Ferrer, sadly, was simply too high a hurdle.

It is the Spaniard's third title in Auckland. He has clearly developed an affinity for the place, and spoke of the tournament with great affection afterwards. He won here last year, and progressed all the way to the Australian Open semifinals. In order to repeat that effort this year he will probably have to beat Novak Djokovic in the quarterfinals, the largest hurdle in tennis.

Kooyong, Final

Tomic d. Fish, 6/4 3/6 7/5

The issue with Kooyong, insofar as an exhibition event conducted in a swirling zephyr can have other issues, has been the low standard of the officiating. Being an exhibition, the players are mostly lenient towards the odd missed call, but there are limits. There is still prize money at stake, and a few thousand onlookers, and a Major tournament starting next week. There is still pride, and for all that the results will not figure the official record, the players do keep count. Jürgen Melzer today expressed great pleasure in achieving his first career win over Gael Monfils.

Sadly, dud line-calls were not the extent of it. The umpires were slow to overrule admitted errors, and in at least one case did not appear to know the rules. This came as Monfils rushed the net, and Melzer sent a curling dipping pass beyond the Frenchman's reach. Or so he thought. Monfils threw his racquet at the ball, connected, and it fell over the net for a winner. It was a moment of exhibition cheer, and less heavy-handed than most. But Melzer was astonished when the point was awarded to his opponent, since you cannot win a point if you aren't holding the racquet. The umpire seemed to concede that Monfils had indeed released the grip, but would not be otherwise swayed.

Too often this week the players felt obliged to take matters into their own hands, with an unusual number of points being conceded on clearly erroneous calls. There was a moment in today's final when Bernard Tomic's first serve was called out, then immediately corrected. The umpire then overruled, calling 'Fault'. Mardy Fish then overruled the umpire - since the serve had clearly landed in - and the umpire was forced to call a let. The issue, surely, is that there are four events under way in Sydney and Auckland (and Hobart), as well as qualifying at Melbourne Park. With finite personnel, it has apparently fallen to the work-experience kids to oversee the matches at Kooyong. There is also no Hawkeye.

Mention should perhaps be made of a curious incident earlier in the event, when Tomic was playing Monfils. The Frenchman was, naturally, remonstrating with the umpire over yet another poor call, when Tomic marched up and for no discernible reason removed the umpire's right shoe, and placed it with his gear. It was a strange moment, even allowing for its keeping with the generally forced bonhomie of an exhibition (and this match was rapidly descending into farce). No one has quite been able to explain what Tomic was getting at, though I perhaps we're being generous in supposing he had a point to make at all. I suspect he felt he was due for some zaniness, but that was the best he could come up with, and ended up merely referencing Woogie from *There's*

Something About Mary, which may well be the first time that's happened in a professional tennis match.

The question was later posed on television as to whether this signalled a broader issue with tennis, whether the players have too little respect for the officials, proving that there are things even more humourless than Tomic's lame gag, and that some of them are permitted to speak on TV. Andy Murray took a swig from a spectator's beer in his match: won't somebody please think of the children?

Commentary of the week: 'Maybe that's a sign that Monfils is beginning to think?!'

Sometimes the Moment Gets You

Australian Open, First Round (Day One)

Tomic d. (22) Verdasco, 4/6 6/7 6/4 6/2 7/5

(13) Dolgoplov d. Jones, 1/6 4/6 6/2 6/2 6/2

"Is *that* Greg Jones? The one with the *ponytail*?" asked the sun-pinked lady behind me in the queue for Margaret Court Arena. Each of her flushed cheeks sported an Australian flag decal. I brought my mighty powers of deduction to bear and guessed she might be Australian. She was pointing at Alexandr Dolgoplov.

"Yeah, that's him," replied her boyfriend with authority through his utterly ordinary goatee, the kind that is standard issue in IT departments the world over. He wore an Australian flag like a cape.

On the scale of their esteem, tennis clearly languished somewhere shy of the national logo, which I suspect they appreciated on a patriotic rather than an aesthetic level. Happily, the Australian Open encourages both passions to coexist, and so they set about brandishing their flags at their new favourite tennis player Greg Jones, even if he did have a girly ponytail. From that point it took them only five minutes to realise they had the wrong man, having carefully observed that the stadium erupted whenever the other guy won a point. The couple exchanged a chagrined grimace – regretting all the A-grade patriotism they'd just wasted on a foreigner – and set about urging on the dude in the green shirt. When Jones moved ahead two sets to love, amidst a flurry of surly remonstrations from Dolgoplov, they joined everyone else in going nuts. If nothing else, it suggests Channel 7's campaign to rebrand Dolgoplov as Aussie Alexandr is gaining little traction. No one is buying it.

In Rod Laver Arena they had no trouble telling the Australian player apart from his opponent, since the Australian was Bernard Tomic and his image has saturated the airwaves for weeks. It helped that his opponent was Fernando Verdasco, who'd come dressed as an exploding canary. The green and gold horde in Garden Square had swelled, and the ululating murmur across the grounds grew to a sustained roar as Tomic broke late in the fifth set. I am not superstitious by nature, but I was tempted to look away, if only to spare my compatriots the agony of seeing Tomic broken back. It had been that kind of day. My patronage was the kiss of death.

Cipolla d. Davydenko, 6/4 4/6 3/6 6/2 6/1

At least, that's how it felt. Every match I visited, the player I favoured either commenced poorly if I was present from the outset, or saw their form essay a sharp nosedive once I arrived. First up was Nikolay Davydenko, who has fallen on hard times, but was still a sure thing against the sadly overmatched and frankly underpowered Flavio Cipolla. It was smotheringly warm in Melbourne today, with a bold northerly breeze and an unhindered sun. Davydenko, from the very beginning, proved incapable of coping with any of these factors, even in isolation. He could not hold serve into the wind, and would commence each service game from that end by conducting an elaborate pantomime, shaking his head and rehearsing ball-tosses, inviting our commiseration. Cipolla brought no weapons to bear beyond a willingness to scurry for every ball, and thereafter apply slice to it. His patience was admirable, but the Russian was still creating plenty of opportunities. The issue was that he could not capitalise on them.

Karlovic d. (31) Melzer, 7/6 7/5 6/3

From there I swung by Court 18, where Jürgen Melzer was incongruously serve-volleying his way to a maiden loss to Ivo Karlovic. Karlovic was, of course, serving big, but he was also making plenty of chipped returns. Through the early going, Melzer was making plenty of volleys, and he looked even less like losing serve than his opponent. It all came undone for the Austrian in the first set tiebreak, when volleys suddenly were missed. Karlovic's supporters, more comprehensively festooned with nationalistic drapery than even the locals, began chanting nasty slogans at Melzer in close harmony. Novak Djokovic was hitting up on the court behind, and so they chanted at him as well.

Kohlschreiber d. (25) Monaco, 7/5 4/6 6/3 6/7 6/0

After that I roamed, swinging by Rod Laver, where Tomic had somehow contrived to lose the second set, to Court 6, where Philipp Kohlschreiber and Juan Monaco were just commencing an enthralling five setter, although they weren't to know that. As ever, it

was a match entirely predicated on the German's willingness to intersperse normal strokes in amongst the plentiful winners and errors, to 'rally', as it were. I was seated with Germans for this one – no flags, but plenty of Bundesliga jerseys – which really rammed home just how draining being a fan of Kohlschreiber's can be. They rode every flashing backhand up the line, and every forehand launched into the back hoarding.

Dimitrov d. Chardy, 4/6 6/3 3/6 6/4 6/4

Even at this early stage of his career, Grigor Dimitrov's more cosmopolitan fan base is similarly conditioned to highs and lows. When I arrived at his court, he had a break point on Chardy's serve in the first set. Four minutes later the Bulgarian had lost his own serve, and, shortly after, the set. As I said, it was that kind of day. It thereafter developed into a pretty wrenching encounter, whose limits were defined by Dimitrov's backhand, Chardy's serve and both players' insipid shakiness on break points. They moved to two sets apiece, and the heat was endless. Kohlschreiber finished off Monaco with a bagel - it was as brilliant as you might imagine - while Dimitrov limped home along a path littered with Chardy's double-faults.

Over on Margaret Court Arena Stadium, Greg Jones was foundering badly as Dolgopolov galloped through the remaining few sets. The Australian flags went limp, though the groans of the punters were knowing, if not affectionate. Despite his obscurity, Greg Jones, by gallantly blowing a two set lead, was demonstrating his credentials as a native son. The Cultural Cringe dictates that we both expect and celebrate our countrymen falling short against the rest of the world. But in Rod Laver Arena and Garden Square the roar was immense as Tomic served out the match, having recovered from a two set deficit, taking Verdasco's best blow and triumphing in a touch over four hours of real tennis. It turns out there's another, rarer kind of Aussie, and we appreciate this kind even more.

As it happened, I did not look away as Tomic served out the match. I'm not superstitious, after all. But for all that I'm not nationalistic, either, I will admit that as Tomic's final forehand winner landed and he hurled his racquet to the court, I was clapping and cheering as vigorously as the guy next to me, who wore a pair of green and gold spectacles, and had the Southern Cross tattooed on the side of his neck. Sometimes the moment gets you.

Photon-Drunk

(4) Murray d. Harrison, 4/6 6/3 6/4 6/2

Photon-drunk from the sun's intimate and ceaseless ministrations, I had either begun to hear voices, or else the suffocating heat had proved sufficient to rewire my brain for telepathy. 'I mean, I have nothing against Harrison, but frankly I wish he'd just bugger off,' muttered a Scottish accent with special vehemence from extreme close range. In my addled torpor I momentarily assumed I was suddenly receiving Andy Murray's innermost thoughts, broadcast as he stalked to his chair in Hisense Arena, having dropped the first set to an inspired Ryan Harrison.

My eyes shot open, mind suddenly racing. Having the No.4 tennis player in the world transmitting his thoughts directly into my head could have its uses, especially if his pre-point mind-clearing ritual involved reciting his own credit card details. Alas, it turned out the comment had originated from the trio of baking Scots lounging in the seats in front of me. The refrain from Noel Coward's 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' skittered through my head, incongruously, since they weren't English, and here I was, expiring in the noonday sun along with them. In Brad Gilbert's surprisingly memorable phrase, the last two days in Melbourne have resembled being 'in a hair dryer'. (Given Fernando Verdasco's familiarity with hair products of all types, it is thus impossible to fathom his decision yesterday to play dressed as a naked flame.)

The moment the draw was released, it was clear that of the top four, Murray had been dealt not only the most treacherous path to the semifinals, but that it would commence with the trickiest opening round as well. Nadal and Federer both faced down qualifiers. Djokovic had earlier dispatched Paolo Lorenzi for the loss of two games, his match the centrepiece of a truly lousy day out for ticket-holders on Rod Laver Arena. Meanwhile Murray faced Ryan Harrison, one of the most dangerous of the sporadically-touted new guard.

Based on Harrison's first set today, he is also one of the most fearless. The serve and forehand he has always owned – they were his passport into the top hundred – but he appears to have injected yards of pace into his backhand drives, especially those directed up the line. However, it's one thing to master a shot in practice, but it's entirely different to dictate with it confidently in match play. (I watched Harrison play a practice set against Alex Bogomolov Jr yesterday, and my first thought – aside from the certainty that this lad hailed from a nation that exalts protein – was that Murray's draw wasn't so difficult after all. Bogomolov was comprehensively out-hitting his erstwhile compatriot.)

The match turned in the second set, not because Harrison grew suddenly fearful, but also not because Murray necessarily lifted. It was simply that Harrison could not maintain his elevated level, which was a shame for those of us who aren't British, and had therefore hoped that an inspired opponent might push the Scot to dizzying heights. Sadly, it wasn't to be. The match remained distinctly earthbound, where Murray prefers it. He has a way of anchoring those who threaten to take flight.

Wily campaigner that he is, Murray's telepathically projected desire that Harrison might bugger off thus turned out to be astutely predictive. He had correctly assumed that the American could not maintain his standard, an assumption that was widely shared by everyone besides his fans. The last three sets were only slightly less entertaining than the first, but the result was hardly in question. The three Scots in front of me never stopped groaning and muttering until the very end. To be fair, Murray didn't either, for all that his usual carping was unusually muted, perhaps owing to the impassive new presence in his player's box.

Whether a sustained work-out in savage conditions will help or hinder Murray in the long run remains an open question, and one that is unlikely to be answered before the weekend. His next few opponents are entirely manageable, including a potential encounter with Bogomolov in the third round. As for Harrison, he will presumably take a great deal from this match, not least of which will be many thousands of new fans, keen to chart his progression as the season unfurls. Kinder draws will come, and I am convinced he will make the most of them. The voices in my head told me so.

Skewed Straight Sets

Australian Open, Second Round (Day Three)

Presumably everyone who cares to know is already exhausted by the unfolding brouhaha between the world's finest male tennis players and the sport's governing bodies. The salient issues include the excessive length of the season, scheduling, prize money, the Davis Cup, Mike Bryan's volleyball court, and Rafael Nadal's concern that his tennis career might adversely impact his recreational holidays in years to come.¹ I think there might be a butler strike looming, as well. The men held a spirited meeting last Saturday, and apparently decided that the best way to air their demands would be to combine them all into one phenomenally garbled message, and then have random players essay conflicting announcements whenever they felt like it. Those for whom English is a second

¹ *To be fair, Mike Bryan's volley ball court issue is not the full extent of his complaints: he doesn't have enough time to enjoy his new swimming pool, either.*

language were encouraged to speak first and loudest. There was, briefly, talk of a player's strike, although this did not eventuate. Instead, through two days of criminal heat at Melbourne Park, the players chose to express their solidarity by killing each other in as many five set marathons as possible. I suppose it could have been worse. It could have been interpretive dance.

Their rage, like the weather, had apparently cooled by the time the second round got underway this morning, although it warmed to a white heat as the day wore on. The early going saw most winners move through in straight sets, although the matches were as skewed as straight sets can be. By the evening however, our heroes had rewarmed to the task of pulverising each other. Nalbandian almost pulverised the umpire. It looked like a lot of work, and I'm amazed they haven't demanded better recompense, or shorter hours.

Falla d. (8) Fish, 7/6 6/3 7/6

The only certainties, as Mardy Fish whined, slouched and ultimately collapsed in straight sets on Court Three today, were that he would later complain about Alejandro Falla's constant recourse to the trainer in the final set, and that the tiresome puns on both players' names would flow. 'Fish was not on Falla today!' ran one, like literary arse-gravy. There are times when it's hard to be disappointed enough in your fellow man, especially those who purport to be writers.

Fish's post-match interview was predictably dominated by an awkward discussion of the rules and etiquette surrounding cramps and the treatment thereof, although to be fair to Fish, he was only answering questions as they came at him. It was the journalists who couldn't let it go, although that didn't deter most of them from writing it up as a cautionary tale of sour grapes. (Think back to Wimbledon 2010, when Federer carelessly mentioned a back injury. He then spent the remainder of the presser fielding follow-up questions, with the result that he was accused of giving his opponent too little credit.) To *his* credit, Fish conceded that he didn't lose because Falla received some rubs during the changeovers. No, he lost because he couldn't get over the fact that Falla received some rubs during the changeovers. There is a difference; the gap in which Fish so often loses himself. 'I'm only human,' he explained afterwards.

In keeping with the new player solidarity, neither man would reveal what was uttered at the sour handshake.

(2) Nadal d. Haas, 6/4 6/3 6/4

Initially Tommy Haas' encounter with Nadal felt like a tragic mismatch, as though the German had brought a knife to a gunfight, or deployed light-cavalry against a full Panzer division. Here was a former world No.2 against the current No.2, and it was a clear case of mortality writ large, an indication of the degree to which the epoch has shifted. At 4/0 down, the story was practically writing itself. This was a shame for Haas, but I wasn't about to turn down so clear an invitation to unleash any number of worn clichés.

Then, Haas held. A patronising mutter rippled around Rod Laver Arena. *Good for him!* He soon broke Nadal, then held, then broke again. The staggered mutters joined up into a perpetual buzz. Haas moved to yet another break point at 4/5. Nadal unloaded three big serves to salvage the set, but it was a close run thing. The knife-fighter had transformed the duel, by closing and grappling. My lazy write-up took a turn for the onerous.

Haas had turned it around with a sudden and frankly unlikely strategic adjustment. He began to loft junk-balls at Nadal's backhand, and the Spaniard, whose backhand will sometimes run hot but can lose shape in a true crucible, began to miss. This disrupted his entire game. The issue, sadly, was that this is not Haas' natural game, and he has always been prodigiously impatient. The German's focus cracked at the start of the second set, and Nadal rode the single break to the end. Haas surged ahead for a time in the third, but it was destined not to last.

Afterwards, as Spidercam swooped in gaily, the players clasped hands warmly, exchanging endearments. Nadal applauded as the crowd was invited to appreciate Haas' effort. The effect was immensely valedictory. Haas removed his shirt and threw it to a girl in the crowd, facilitating one young lady's life-long dream of being doused in his sweat.

Don't Panic

Australian Open, Second Round (Day Four)

Of the 128 men who contested the first round at this year's Australian Open, 96 have already lost. This is the ordinary attrition rate through two rounds of a major tournament, so there's no reason to panic. The numbers check out. Of the 32 remaining, I can say that there are as many Canadians as Americans, even if we include those Americans who turned out to be Russian. Seeds have tumbled – as you traverse the grounds they crunch underfoot – but not any of the truly fertile ones, the ones that are

likely to bear fruit. Roddick's loss will be amply discussed, but not because he lost. Those given to considering his thighs now have an excuse. The rest of us have no choice.

There were a number of five setters today, but compared to the first round's they weren't *savage*, although a couple were long. Twice players fought back from two sets down to level the match, only to lose the decider. Three men who'd survived the savagery of round one hit the deck in round two. Only Gilles Simon featured in both groups.

(5) Ferrer d. Sweeting, 6/7 6/2 3/6 6/2 6/3

It never felt as though David Ferrer wouldn't come back against Ryan Sweeting; perhaps a five-setter had seemed unlikely, but an upset was *unthinkable*. It was also a useful reminder that just because a match goes to five sets, doesn't mean it is necessarily close. Nadal's win over Isner at Roland Garros last year demonstrated this principle, but really, the fact that it requires demonstration is a curious issue. There was a time when it didn't, when good players were taken to five sets all the time, yet remained favourites to win. A decade of domination by a parade of godlike No.1s has accustomed us to a WTA-like river cruise through the early rounds for the top players. Dropped sets here and there have become newsworthy, and widely analysed, suggesting the rapacious new-cycle as a partial culprit. It turns out there's not a lot to say about Nadal or Djokovic ambling past a cast of extras on the way to the quarterfinals. Or, more accurately, there is plenty to say, but finding new ways to say it is a lot of work, and it's easier to spin a dropped set or two as a 'scare'.

It is entirely possible that I had too much faith in Ferrer, or too little in Sweeting. Idling courtside today, in relenting sunshine and an edgeless southerly, I had the utmost confidence that the tournament would not lose its fifth seed. Ferrer was two sets to one down, but the three sets had not been taxing, barely registering on the Spaniard's own worn scale for such things. A great deal of this owed to Sweeting, who in the last eight or nine months has somehow transformed himself from a toothless pusher into a daring baseliner. Ferrer took the last couple of sets comfortably, two and three.

(9) Tipsarevic d. Duckworth, 3/6 6/2 7/6 6/4

It was a broadly similar story over on Margaret Arena Stadium, where Janko Tipsarevic dropped the opening set to the promising James Duckworth, and thereafter toiled mightily to secure a four set win. But the thing is, for all that Tipsarevic has earned his detractors, he has also earned his place in the top ten, and he *should* be willing to work

hard for a win. He should, he is, and he did. It's a nice thing to be able to say about a guy who all too often hasn't. A fine match.

(24) Nishikori d. Ebden, 3/6 1/6 6/4 6/1 6/1

Kei Nishikori's recovery from two sets down was a different matter, since it was not a fine match, and he was legitimately in danger of losing it, if only momentarily. The moment came at the start of the third set, when Matthew Ebden was still on a roll, having romped through the first two. But a moment was all it was, and once it passed the last three sets felt like the very long denouement to a tale that had already been resolved. It was probably long enough for Ebden to make peace with his fate, but the vehemently hurled racquet on match point suggested otherwise. There is also the possibility that the fey spirit inhabiting MCA had taken possession of him, as it did to both Nalbandian and Baghdatis yesterday. That court has taken a pounding in the last 24 hours.

At the commencement of today's play, there was the possibility that two Japanese males might inhabit the third round of a major, an outcome that has happened precisely never before. It was very nearly none, but Nishikori's eventual victory helpfully offset Tatsuma Ito's earlier loss to Nicholas Mahut. It is also only the second time Mahut has progressed so far, which is frankly surprising. He next plays Djokovic, so he won't be going on with it. Lest the goal was an historical angle, I can say that Frederico Gil's win over Marcel Granollers has propelled a Portuguese male into the last 32 for the first time.

Night Thoughts

Australian Open, Second Round (Day Four)

(14) Monfils d. Bellucci, 2/6 6/0 6/4 6/2

Like the unending and infinitely kitsch waltzes of Johann Strauss Jr., which inspire Austrians in Vienna but nausea everywhere else, Henri Leconte's deranged commentary only really comes into its own when applied to Gael Monfils. It's a question of context, though like Strauss, Leconte eventually grows onerous even under optimal conditions. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition is revealing, although the interest resides less in anything Leconte has to say, than in how he says it.

The standard word on Monfils, reiterated soporifically, is that he is wasting his talent. (It is a hard word to refute, since the evidence is overwhelming. When he plays the way everyone wants him to – purposefully and assertively – he can match anyone, the top

three included.) This 'fact' sits at the top of every commentator's crib sheet, and viewers can depend upon it being covered off during the hit up. A number of subsidiary narratives have coalesced around this central assumption, most notably that of the idiot-savant, and the idea that Monfils continues to play that way he does in spite of constant well-meaning advice to the contrary. The fond belief is that this advice comes at him consistently from all quarters – from accomplished tacticians all the way down to Roger Rasheed, whose wisdom is of the hokey fridge-magnet variety – but that Monfils either will not or cannot take it in.

In general, commentators of an Anglo-persuasion seem more disposed to react to Monfils' on-court antics with a stern and protestant disapproval. Any admiration they may feel for a gratuitous, slam dunk, topspin lob is immediately tempered by puritanical tut-tutting. We're a short step away from slapping a PG rating on Monfils' matches, thereby affording our children's vulnerable minds at least some protection from the Frenchman's dissolute influence.

Leconte, however, matches Monfils' profligate exuberance with an unhinged exuberance of his own. As a Frenchman whose country has produced only one male Slam champion in the Open era, Leconte has as much excuse as anyone for subscribing to the cliché of Monfils as feckless man-child. But he seems happy to enjoy Monfils for what he is, to be caught up in the spectacle, and his disapproval therefore never goes beyond exasperated affection. It suggests that the prevailing belief that Monfils should curtail his showmanship does not prevail everywhere. Leconte may act the buffoon, but he is surely no idiot, and his willingness to appreciate Monfils as he is shows us that watching tennis need not always be so serious.

Hewitt d. (15) Roddick, 3/6 6/3 6/4 ret.

On the subject of obvious advice delivered from multiple sources, last night's abbreviated encounter between Andy Roddick and Lleyton Hewitt had plenty to be going on with. Hobbled by a dud hamstring midway through the second set, Roddick's options for achieving victory were reduced to one, which was to hit through Hewitt and hope for the best. Thus obliged to shorten points, he suddenly played like everybody wants him to, the way he used to. Sadly he couldn't move any more, and so was unlikely to win or even see out the match, but he hasn't looked this potent off the ground in years. It proved to my satisfaction that if Roddick would only play like this while able to move freely, he is sufficiently skilled to return to the top ten.

Of course, he won't do that. Jim Courier made an interesting comment during last night's call, when he declared that 'everyone' has begged Roddick to go after his forehand. We

knew that already, but I hadn't realised that 'everyone' included Roddick's coach Larry Stefanki. At some level, I'd supposed that Roddick's utterly humourless game plan was something he and Stefanki had devised between them, though why they then chose to inflict it upon an unhappy world I cannot say.

Slaying the Dragon

Australian Open, Third Round (Day Five)

(3) Federer d. Karlovic, 7/6 7/5 6/3

There is a pervasive tendency – entirely inexcusable – for commentators calling Ivo Karlovic's matches to treat him like a kind of mythical beast the hero must overcome in order to fulfil their quest. Inevitably, there is ample discussion of how players must make the most of their few chances, and of strategies to combat his serve. It's rather like listening to *Warcraft* players thrash out tactics for taking down a particularly tough dragon. At least early on today, there was no comparable analysis of what Karlovic needed to do in order to see off Roger Federer, since Karlovic apparently isn't a hero on a quest of his own. Offsetting this generally dehumanising tendency, it proved to be a kindness when Jim Courier brought up Karlovic's popularity on Twitter.

Service holds were already ticking away with metronomic fluency through the early part of today's match when Courier essayed the fairly uncontroversial point that Federer would not bother coming over his backhand returns today. It was a disposable comment, and would have worked adequately as a brief aside, but Courier characteristically lavished considerable airtime on exploring it fully. His point, apparent to everyone even before he dissected it, was that Karlovic's freakish delivery presents difficulties for one-handed backhands.

Until 6-6 in the first set tiebreak, Courier's analysis not only had the virtue of being obvious, it also seemed right. Following an excellent point to save set point – which I will return to – Federer suddenly stepped in and ripped a backhand return winner off Karlovic's first serve, setting up a set point of his own, which he duly converted. When brilliance so succinctly defies common wisdom, it is easy to call it genius. There were a number of red and white banners fluttering around Rod Laver Arena telling us exactly that, and that we need to be quiet while Federer works.

But this wasn't the point of the match. The prior point was. Karlovic had played a strong tiebreak, and earned his set point by outplaying a tentative Federer from the baseline, which Hawkeye proved is Federer's preferred line. At 5-6, Federer chipped his return

low, and then drilled his follow-up passing shot straight at Karlovic's hip. Given the Croat's wingspan, the efficacy of the tactic should have been unquestionable, but he was volleying well, and had so far fended balls from his body expertly. He reflexed back a drop-volley, and moved in. Federer dashed to the forecourt, and, noting Karlovic edging in, flicked an audacious lob. Karlovic leapt, but could only frame it. An inch lower, and the Croat would have had the set. The margins at this level are almost nothing, and it is astonishing how effectively the best players manoeuvre within them.

Federer only broke serve twice in the match, once in each of the remaining sets, but it was enough to achieve a straight sets win. The first break clinched the second set, courtesy of an outrageous blocked backhand return on the full stretch. He faced two break points of his own, which turns out is more than Karlovic's average in their encounters. They have now played eleven times in eight years, and Karlovic has earned just 17 break points, and converted one of them. He should know by now that you only get limited chances on the Federer serve, and that you simply must make the most of them.

What Price Quality?

Australian Open, Third Round (Day Six)

(1) Djokovic d. Mahut, 6/0 6/1 6/1

There was plenty of great tennis on Rod Laver Arena today, but only ever from one end of the court, although that end alternated every two games. Play commenced at 11am, and had wrapped by 3.30pm. A nosebleed ticket to today's day session cost \$127.50, and provided a total of four and half hours of 'entertainment', but only if one includes watching the players hitting up, and killing time between matches. Actual play time totalled considerably less than that, at a touch under 200 minutes. That works out to about \$38 per hour, a steep price to pay for some of the least competitive tennis in grand slam history. Across today's three matches – two of which were women's – the victorious players dropped a total of five games. Is a refund out of the question?

The lone men's match was between Nicolas Mahut and Novak Djokovic, who last year attained a taste for WTA-like scores. The world No.1 had a realistic shot at inflicting the first triple-bagel in the tournament's history, which would have provided the match with a second talking point, besides that fact that it was Mahut's thirtieth birthday. With so little transpiring on court, the commentators were obliged to amuse themselves, with typically disturbing results.

While it is true that Mahut was injured - another useful talking-point - realistically this had zero bearing on the outcome. A healthy Frenchman might have claimed a few more games, but to actually take a set he would need to clone himself (though only once). To actually win he'd need to recreate the 'burly brawl' scene from the second *Matrix* film. Djokovic looked frightening, but he had no reason not to.

It raises a pertinent question: all else being equal, would the crowd prefer good tennis, or a good match? Presumably they'd take both, but through the first week on Rod Laver Arena that has rarely been a possibility. The close matches have mostly involved locals, while the big names have not dropped a set. The more I think on it, the more I suspect the question itself is flawed. The choice in the first week - especially in the day sessions - has not been between good tennis and good matches, but between good matches and famous names. Thus we endured Djokovic and Mahut, while Andy Murray and Michael Llodra - surely a more interesting match-up - are relegated to Hisense. But would the sell-out crowd in RLA have preferred it the other way around?

(17) Gasquet d. (9) Tipsarevic, 6/3 6/3 6/1

As ever in the first week, the smart ticket today appeared to be the general admission ground pass, coupled with the foresight to ensconce oneself early in Margaret Court Arena. Perusing the litany of horrendous mismatches that passes for the daily schedule, only a couple of matches actually stood out, and chief among these was Janko Tipsarevic and Richard Gasquet on MCA.

Alas, it turned out to be another blowout, sadly in keeping with the day's theme. Todd Woodbridge, commentating, had it right when he pointed out that for all Gasquet's backhand is his money shot, it's the forehand that tells the tale. When it's on, he's close to unbeatable. Today it was on, and contributed its share to his 33 winners (with just eight unforced errors, and an 85% return on net forays). These heroic numbers dovetailed nicely with Tipsarevic's, which were appalling, although he did achieve a 100% return on breakpoint conversion: one from one. The third set was little short of an outright tank by the Serbian, who was reduced to wild and petulant slashing by the last game. Given his history, I suppose he is to be commended for seeing out that final game at all.

A Question of Experience

Australian Open, Third Round (Day Six)

Hewitt d. (23) Raonic, 4/6 6/3 7/6 7/3

There are moments when Jim Courier's urge to turn a phrase trumps his faltering inspiration, and leads him inexorably into verbiage, if not downright garbiage. "Hello, Mr Momentum. Welcome to Lleyton Street!" he intoned during last night's match, an utterance so transcendently naff that it saw him briefly trend on Twitter. Channel 7 viewers will put up with a lot – even the execrable promos for upcoming shows are now broadly tolerated – but it turns out there are limits. I hasten to add that Courier for the most part performs his task adequately if not admirably, and that he was otherwise correct: momentum had swung Hewitt's way.

It certainly needed to. Raonic – who may or may not live on Milos Street – had already spent a set justifying the constant comparisons to Pete Sampras. The serve was unassailable, and the forehand compelling. Mostly it compelled Hewitt to run. Coupled with effortless power – even on the backhand – a comparison to Marat Safin seemed equally as appropriate. Luckily for Hewitt, he has spent a long career facing those guys, and knew what to do. It became a question of experience, which the Australian has in spades.

As the match unfolded, and Hewitt welcomed Mr Momentum into his home, as a prelude to drugging him and chaining him up in the basement, the increasing impotency of Raonic's first serve became obvious. He was landing barely half of them, and winning fewer of the resulting points than he would have hoped to. Courier was also asked how much credit Hewitt could take for this, to which the American quickly responded 'all of it'. He then said it again, at some length, lest we at home had somehow misunderstood. But was he correct? I suspect Raonic's substandard serving owed at least as much to conditions and context, which includes his opponent but certainly isn't limited to him.

The key environmental issue for a serve such as Raonic's is not the pace of the court – and Rod Laver Arena's is about medium in the scheme of things – but the speed of the balls and air. The plexicushion surface at Melbourne Park has a fairly rough, grippy top layer – it's quite abrasive to the touch – which results in it taking a lot of spin, and in the balls fluffing up very quickly. As the balls reach the end of their life cycle (nine games), they grow perceptibly slower, an effect that is further exaggerated in an inexperienced player's mind. Ball changes generally produce a marked acceleration in play. Abetting this effect, the air at night is slower (through being cooler), although it was not humid.

With all of that being said, these various forces when combined actually result in only a marginal impact on a serve such as Raonic's. It slows down a little, but coupled with his height and spin it remains fearsome, and more than capable of performing its assigned task, which is that of a sustained artillery salvo. More telling is the psychological effect of playing in these conditions, particularly for an inexperienced guy with plenty on his mind. This was his first match on a centre court at a Major, played in prime time against the local favourite. Hewitt is also a crafty veteran, doing all he could to exploit any weakness he could discover in Raonic's game. The Australian was especially sturdy when returning Raonic's second serve, and was even winning his share of points when the first serve landed (almost a quarter of them).

Under sufficient pressure, minor issues are magnified. To Raonic, blinking in the lights, it would have felt like he was fighting the medium itself, like running into a headwind. The upshot was that he began to over-hit his first serve, and miss. This explains how even in 'slower' conditions he posted the fastest serves yet seen in the tournament – topping out at 228km/h – but only served at 53%. Last year he averaged 65% on hard courts across the entire season. Like I said, context matters, too. Adrenaline surely played its part, and the evolving desperation wrought by falling inexorably behind to a proven champion. Too much of this detail is glossed over when pundits suggest that a player just plays badly, as though form is a question of personal preference, or occurs in a vacuum.

Asked in the on-court interview whether he had anticipated reaching the second week at the Australian Open, Hewitt replied that he hadn't been sure his body would last through one match, and that so far he hadn't looked beyond any of his opponents. Courier astutely observed that he certainly wouldn't be looking past his next one, who is Novak Djokovic. Meanwhile Bernard Tomic tonight plays Roger Federer. The Australians may have detained Mr Momentum for a time, but I suspect Mr Reality is about to pay a visit.

A Species of Insanity

Australian Open, Fourth Round (Day Seven)

(3) Federer d. Tomic, 6/4 6/2 6/2

Channel 7 in Australia tonight asked its viewers whether Bernard Tomic could 'pull off the upset' against Roger Federer. Sadly, thanks to the miracle of social media, the question was not merely rhetorical. Viewers were invited to respond, whereupon Channel 7 usefully collated the responses into a single number and relayed it back to us. It turned out that 69% of us believed Tomic would prevail; further proof, if more were necessary, that patriotism is a species of insanity.

To say that Tomic had no real chance at winning isn't to say that he played badly. He didn't. In fact he played very well. That is how he won eight games, although Federer's lackadaisical serving and intermittent application played its part. The gap between the top four and the rest of the field is wide already, but in the case of Tomic, who relies so much upon out-thinking and bamboozling his opponents, the gap can seem like a chasm. The top four are rarely confounded by strange play – Murray is sometimes troubled by his own – and they all move so well and understand the court so instinctively that mere sophistication is dealt with savagely. It is to his credit that Tomic understands this, and his approach to tonight's encounter was radically unlike his others this week. He'd known both Verdasco and Querrey could be outfoxed, so he duly outfoxed them. He'd known he couldn't outhit Dolgoplov, so he didn't try to.

Tomic knew he couldn't outhit Federer, either, but it was the best shot he had. It's hard to know precisely when this became clear to him, but I assume he received some useful advice after his last press conference, in which he'd been brimming with blithe candour. There was ample discussion of how educational his previous encounter with Federer had been, and that he now knew where and how Federer could or could not hurt him. He was expansive on his tactics, which apparently relied heavily on keeping the ball low to Federer's backhand. At some point in the following two days, someone hopefully suggested that the lessons learned facing a jet-lagged, US Open-scarred Federer on a dodgy Sydney grasscourt were not strictly applicable to a rested, hungry Federer on a grand slam hard court, and that advertising your strategy ahead of time isn't wise.

On this surface, and in this form, Federer was never going to allow Tomic adequate space and time in which to operate. Consequently the only long rallies were tightrope affairs, a few of which saw Tomic rock Federer back on his heels, even outslugging him in forehand duels. But this was not the majority of rallies, which mostly went to Federer. Especially as the match wore on, the world No.3 sought to expose the young Australian's poor movement, mercilessly exploiting the drop shot and the backhand up the line. Tomic first began to guess, and then to guess wrong. After one Federer drop shot, Tomic turned to his box and mouthed 'Wow', later admitting that 'I don't know how he does it in that situation'. He confessed that he'd even enjoyed watching Federer hit his best shots back for winners. I wonder if he appreciated that so many were struck from the backhand, given how allegedly 'simple' nullifying it is.

It must be borne in mind that while tonight will mean everything for Tomic, for Federer it was just another fourth round. He has now won 31 of these consecutively at grand slam level, and they were a pretty big deal for all 31 of his opponents at the time. The miasma of hype that surrounded tonight's encounter – so cloying for viewers, and

crippling for Tomic – will be brushed off easily by the great Swiss, who eight years ago became exempt from Sampras' adage that you can lose a Major in the first week. He will be looking ahead, to the quarterfinals, and a match with Juan Martin del Potro. Channel 7's viewers, if asked, would doubtless insist that Federer is a shoe-in. Seasoned onlookers know better. The matches that he *can* lose are about to begin.

Resistance is Useful

Australian Open, Fourth Round (Day Eight)

(1) Djokovic d. Hewitt, 6/1 6/3 4/6 6/3

Channel 7 has hopefully learned its lesson. Whereas yesterday's promos blithely contended that Tomic would take it to Federer, today's were more circumspect, not to say understated: 'Lleyton Hewitt gears up for another massive challenge!' Yesterday they asked their viewers whether Tomic could actually win, with predictably absurd results. Today they wanted to know what Hewitt must do in order to win, to 'pull out the big one'. Shockingly, no one came up with much. Once the match began, and Novak Djokovic gambolled through the opening set, it became clear even to the viewers that it really didn't matter what Hewitt did. The world No.1 proved some time ago that resistance is useless.

He proved it again in the second set, even though the resistance was stiffer, and the score closer. The third set moved to 3/0 to the Serbian, but it already felt over. Pre-composed eulogies were adjusted, and padded with commiserations that it had to end with a bagel. But then the seagulls arrived – which sounds like a euphemism, but isn't – and the spell, somehow, was shattered. Courtside colour-commentators scurried for cover. Brad Gilbert wore bird-shit, and Todd Woodbridge only narrowly eluded a similar fate. Somehow, en route to a blowout, Hewitt held, then broke, then held again. The numbers had barely changed - perhaps Djokovic was striking fewer winners - but Hewitt was marshalling everything he had, as ever making much of little: a patchy serve, and fumes and a loathing of defeat. At 4/4, Djokovic grew tight on serve, and Hewitt, desperate and everywhere, gutsed the break. He gradually served out the set, saving a break-back point with an icy drop shot, and weathering a return barrage from Djokovic. As he claimed the set, the Australian turned to his box and raised his fist, his eyes sheened. If he was to go out, this was how it was meant to be, taking the battle to the world's best player. The fanatics went bananas, but then all of Rod Laver Arena did. Out in Garden Square they were capering. Resistance, it transpired, always has its uses.

The fourth set began evenly, but there was only one outcome. Djokovic was lifting, inexorably. Melbourne Park has been beset by communications issues for days, which perhaps explains why Channel 7 didn't get the memo. They put the possibility of a Hewitt comeback to the viewers. Predictably, the viewers believed he could do it. Predictably, they were wrong. But they believe, like Channel 7 believes, because it must. It will never learn its lesson.

Now that it has finally concluded, I am compelled to say the story of the first week has been the gallant Australians, and not only because the penalty for not doing so is immediate deportation. Some blame can be laid at the mangled feet of the players themselves. Having two home-grown men push through to the fourth round of the home slam was always going to resonate with the natives, and therefore with the presiding broadcaster.

Channel 7's current ascendancy in the Australian market can be traced back directly to Hewitt's run to the Australian Open final in 2005, which was aired fleetingly in between relentless promos for *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives*. The night he lost the final to Marat Safin – still the highest rating program in Australian history – Hewitt assuaged his disappointment by proposing to his Channel 7 soap opera girlfriend. Now that he has lost to Djokovic, he will be joining their commentary team for the tournament's remainder. Have a player and a television network ever been so tightly entwined?

Having Hewitt and Tomic scrap their way to the fourth round has therefore proved a godsend for the Channel 7, who know better than anyone just how quickly ratings trail off once the local talent flies the coop. If you can't watch Federer or Nadal – who remain the biggest draws everywhere – then watching strangers who by sheer coincidence were born in the same country as you is apparently the next best thing. Network executives still break into a cold sweat at the recollection of the 2002 Open, when the big names and the locals fell early. Thank god Safin unleashed his 'blondtourage' that year. By any measure, tonight's match was therefore gold.

To be fair, Hewitt and Tomic have provided adequate entertainment in their own right, and it's hard to begrudge anyone their excitement, since I've hardly been above revelling in it myself. Just two days ago, Hewitt resurrected a strikingly dull day of tennis by defeating Milos Raonic in four stern sets, while Tomic's recovery from two sets down against Fernando Verdasco was a fitting centrepiece for the first day.

For someone who follows the Majors closely – and I do, though I ration myself to only four per year – I am generally amazed at how quickly and cruelly the draw pares down.

In just a week, the tournament has shed all but eight of its original 128 entrants. Even General Haig didn't achieve that kind of attrition at the Somme, although, unlike in that fateful battle, Gallic losses have been particularly horrendous. Of the 15 Frenchman who commenced last week, none now remain, although it is regrettable that their putatively best players – Monfils, Tsonga, Simon – fell with perfunctory ease. Kei Nishikori has become the first Japanese man to reach the Australian Open quarterfinals in 80 years. Frederico Gil became the first Portuguese man to reach the third round at any Major, ever.

David Nalbandian famously exited in a haze of cock-ups and hammy bafflement. Baghdatis, more famously, flipped out and threw a fit that was disturbing not only in its cold intensity, but in its thoroughness. It's gone viral, and he's become a verb: 'to Baghdatis', for when you just have to smash everything. Wearied, Isner fell to Lopez, who fought bravely, until he met Nadal, when he fought barely. Llodra and Murray proved that tennis can still be fun, offering a match that was so entertaining even Murray enjoyed it. Roddick lost his hamstring, Kukushkin lost his hip, and Tipsarevic lost his head. Kohlschreiber, as ever, played well until he didn't. Gasquet is just a pretty backhand.

Ivo Karlovic pushed Federer to a miraculous first set tiebreak, but no further. Harrison's first set against Murray and Hewitt's tonight remain the only sets the big four have collectively lost. Tommy Haas hit upon the winning tactic against Rafael Nadal – variety without relent to the Spaniard's backhand – although it turned out not to be quite winning enough. Before tonight, Djokovic dropped 10 games in three matches. These four guys are so often the story of the second week – the week everyone will remember – so it is entirely appropriate that they have barely featured in the first.

No, the first week has largely belonged to everyone else, even if they're now mostly on their way home. But most of all, it has belonged to the two who've finally lost, but are already home.

Petrushka in Fist Pumps

Australian Open, Quarterfinals (Day Nine)

(2) Nadal d. (7) Berdych, 6/7 7/6 6/4 6/3

Serving at 5-6 in the second tiebreaker, Rafael Nadal came within a foot of trailing Tomas Berdych two sets to love. Luckily for the Spaniard, the foot belonged to Berdych, and it was, typically, in his mouth, where it had been for days, ever since that set-to

with Nicolas Almagro. An engaging point ended with Berdych at the net, and a testing but makeable backhand volley on his strings. The volley found the alley, and Nadal claimed the set a few points later. His celebration was a marvel of *avant-garde* choreography, *Petrushka* in fist pumps. The first stage of the match was over - after just two and a half hours on court - and the second was set to begin. Fluffed volleys and extravagant celebrations would henceforth define the evening, which somehow had hours to go.

This is not to say that Berdych lacked fight, or that Nadal's celebrations were not merited (although I did note several cries of 'Vamos!' on utterly unforced Czech errors). It also isn't to say that Nadal would have lost from two sets down - I suspect he might still have won - but securing that second set certainly freed something within the world No.2. He began to cut loose on his forehand, with an abandon hardly glimpsed in years. Instead of gradually working Berdych over via long chains of crosscourt blows, pushing him back and across until he could be put away, Nadal began to launch ferocious one-two combinations. By the fourth set he was crushing return winners at will, and expertly matching each with a tailored fist-pump, a sommelier of exultation.

The crowd's delight was immediate and unstinting. Whereas Berdych arrived on court to lusty booing, and hastily adapted pop-medleys from the Berdych Army, Nadal emerged to a bellowing swell of adulation. While the boos were manufactured, the affection aimed at the Spaniard felt real enough. The way it cascaded upward through the stands in ramified swells testified to that. When he claimed the point of the match - a 29 stroke masterpiece of thrust, parry, probe and flutter - the eruption was immense. As with many such points, it ended with Berdych stranded at the net, forlorn amongst the wreckage of volleys not dealt with.

It was symptomatic of a match in which Berdych could create but not complete. His groundstrokes, especially through the early going, were vicious and penetrating, until he achieved the short ball, or the cherished net-position. He crushed plenty from there, but he missed too many, especially on break points. He ended on 2/13. There's such a thing as a killer instinct, and his opponent has it, although I suppose Almagro did, too.

Perhaps ironically, there was a point in which Berdych would have won the rally had he only targeted Nadal at the net. Alas, Asimov's first law of robotics forbids him from deliberately causing harm to a human - although it has little to say about acting prissy about it afterwards - and he attempted a regulation pass, which he missed. Speculation abounded prior to the match whether Nadal would 'do it for Nico', following two days stewing in patriotic juices. Certainly Nadal seemed more pumped up than usual for a

quarterfinal, but who is to say why. He generally doesn't need a reason, and tonight's match was conducted in fine spirits, capped by a handshake rich with mutual respect. After four hours on court, both men deserved it, and the crowd, commendably, no longer felt obligated to revile the Czech.

A year ago, I watched Berdych fold meekly to Novak Djokovic at the same stage on the same court. Then he'd been recovering from a horrendous end to 2010. He saw out 2011 in far better trim, pushing to the semifinals of the Tour Finals, and then having his hard drive defragged. His loss this time around was altogether more accomplished, and honourable. If the players ranked above him were not so fine, I would predict big things for him in the coming season. It is enough to insist that he has developed into a worthy world No.7. Right now that is no small thing.

As for Nadal, his strong finish was tremendously encouraging, and suggested that he has finally played himself into something like top form. He may well need it. For the first time in seven years, he will face Roger Federer in the semifinals of a Major.

On Inevitability

Australian Open, Quarterfinals (Day Ten)

(1) Djokovic d. (5) Ferrer, 6/4 7/6 6/1

(4) Murray d. (24) Nishikori, 6/3 6/3 6/1

David Ferrer, in the press conference following his straight sets loss to Novak Djokovic last night, was asked whether the gap between the top four in men's tennis and the rest of the field could be closed. His response was blunt and realistic, indeed more so than his assessment of his own game had been: 'No, I don't think so . . . I think the top four, it's another level.'

For a time the dull joke had been that the top four were a lock for the semifinals at every significant event they all entered, notwithstanding that it happened less frequently than most pundits realised. The joke became an absurdity last year, however, when it occurred more than anyone could believe. For all the talk of great depth in men's tennis, such emphatic domination by an elite coterie of players has no precedent. Since the beginning of last year there have been five majors contested (including the current Australian Open), which means there have been 20 semifinal berths available. The top four have filled 18 of those 20 spots, with the exceptions being Ferrer at last year's Australian Open, and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at Wimbledon. Bear in mind that Ferrer

defeated an injured Rafael Nadal for his spot, while Tsonga overran Roger Federer from two sets to love down, the first time this had happened in a major. Had Nadal's hamstring held together, and had Federer closed out that match, it could very well have been 20 from 20 spots. They aren't the Big Four merely because they win everything, but because they stop anyone else from even getting close.

However, we must be careful here, and not collapse too readily into the trap wrought by a tight focus. Viewed from within, the interminable can easily seem eternal, whereas a longer perspective reveals change. At the end of 2004, Federer's first dominant season, the question was already asked whether anyone could actually challenge him at the top of the game. In July of 2005 Nadal commenced his record stint of 160 consecutive weeks at No.2. By 2007, we were again restive with the status quo, and began asking how the duopoly at the top might be broken apart. It turned out it couldn't be (for now), but it could be augmented. By January 2008, Novak Djokovic had claimed his first major, and had locked down the No.3 spot. Within another eighteen months, Murray had broadened the elite once more. The Scot has yet to claim a major title - and I may well be as sick of hearing about that as he is - but he has now reached the semifinals or better at six of the last eight majors, and claimed eight Masters titles.

The certainty that the top four would therefore reach the semifinals at this Australian Open was so pervasive and obvious that even essaying a prediction to that effect seemed like an exercise in going through the motions. (Plenty of people still went through those motions, largely because 'draw analysis' is virtually self-generating content.) Whether your picks were based on sound statistical modelling, a vague gut-feeling, or a consultation with your local haruspex, the outcome was much the same. With the semifinal line-up locked in, interest turned to the quarterfinals, and to the question of who might actually be challenged in the final eight. Most people picked Berdych to face Nadal, del Potro to face Federer, Tsonga to face Murray, and Ferrer to face Djokovic. There was some variation engendered by the vagaries of nationalism - American pundits insinuated Fish or Isner into the final eight - but most objective observers seemed to predict that configuration for the quarterfinals. For the most part, they were correct. Only Tsonga failed to make it the cut, falling to Kei Nishikori in five sets the round before. If certainty in the final four inspires a eulogy on the death of men's tennis, then being able to predict the final eight surely broadens it into a requiem.

This notion - that there is a discernible Little Four directly below the Big Four - was also put to Ferrer in his presser. He shirked engaging with the idea, perhaps due to the clumsiness of the question itself. He knows that while his lesser group may have pushed through to the quarterfinals as predicted, in some cases it was a close run thing, and

that once there, only Berdych offered much resistance. He seemed resigned to this. Perhaps that's the issue. It's hard to resist the idea that we're all growing resigned, and that even the other 124 guys in the draw were as certain as the rest of us precisely who would remain standing once 128 became four.

A Question of Judgement

Australian Open, Semifinal (Day Eleven)

(2) Nadal d. (3) Federer, 6/7 6/2 7/6 6/4

The winning pattern was clear from the beginning, as it so often is between these two. You go at his backhand hard - press and knead it without relent - and it will eventually break down. Sure, you'll get soaked by the odd high-pressure winner, but mostly what leaks out, if you're patient, is a short ball or an error. From there it's simply a matter of mopping up. Sadly, Roger Federer could not maintain this tactic tonight beyond the first three games, although he occasionally returned to it. Whenever he did come back to it - sometimes for games at time - he barely lost a point. Rafael Nadal's backhand was mostly impotent, retaining none of the *élan* with which it saw out the Berdych match. For some reason, however, whether it was confusion, arrogance or idiocy, Federer repeatedly veered away from this proven tactic. Much as he used to with the drop shot, does he believe that simply hammering away at an opponent's weaker side constitutes a cheap tactic?

Nadal, thankfully, experiences no such compunction, and nor should he. If targeting a weakness is cheap, then he is right to be parsimonious. He will happily hit to Federer's backhand all day, although he never has to, since it fissures and crumbles rather sooner than that. However, there's little point in harping on about it, since this is a defining pattern in all their matches, and it is the one thing everyone knows about their rivalry, even those who know nothing else. And while it would be misleading to say this dynamic had no bearing on this match's outcome, it truthfully had only little. It was really decided by Nadal's outrageous strength (of game and mind), and Federer's errors (of execution and strategy). Nadal's forehand in particular was very nearly perfect, and Federer engaged with it at his peril. The decision to avoid that wing should have thus been a no-brainer, although no-brainer equally sums up Federer's decision not to.

Federer led in each of the first three sets, and in each one the lead was surrendered in a flurry of unforced errors. Without fail, his first serve deserted him when attempting to consolidate a break. He ended the night with a truly heroic 60 unforced errors, and I suspect at least half of those found the tape on forehands up the line, although this had

some value insofar as it stopped him from following it to the net, and thence being passed.

The decision of whether or not to approach to Nadal's forehand when rushing the net is roughly analogous to the decision of whether to slam your own head in the door when you pass through a doorway. It's not really a decision at all. You just don't do it, no exceptions. You don't do it when the Spaniard doesn't have to move, obviously, but you also don't do it if he has to move, since he is as lethal on the run. The only time one may consider approaching to his forehand is when there is no chance he will hit it, such as when he is stranded in the backhand doubles alley with his foot in a bear trap. Then you might consider it, but should probably still opt out. Nadal earned his final breakpoint of the match - at 4/4 in the fourth set - with a sprinting forehand pass that nearly defied belief. It clearly defied Jim Courier's belief, since he waxed adamant that Nadal had no business making it. Long experience has surely taught us that there has never been a more dangerous player running at a forehand than Nadal, even including Pete Sampras, although Djokovic is his superior when moving the other way. Nadal will strike some mighty backhand passes, undeniably, but I don't recall Federer once laying a racquet on a forehand pass tonight.

Federer saved the first matchpoint, by doing nothing more than pressing Nadal's backhand, without let-up. He won the point, and then moved to breakpoint. He returned, pushed Nadal wide after the Spaniard's response found the tape and snuck over. Nadal lunged and threw out his racquet, improvising a kind of squash-shot lob. Federer had perfect net position, but the lob cleared him, and landed on the back edge of the line. Federer's subsequent overhead proved too ambitious, and arced wide, and they returned to deuce. With minimum consideration, I can say that lob numbers among the luckiest tennis shots I have ever seen, in fortune even exceeding Djokovic forehand winner in New York last year. Afterwards, on court, Nadal conceded as much: 'I was very lucky in that last game.' However, like Djokovic's famous forehand return, it wasn't only luck. You also have to be good. I suspect Nadal would make that shot perhaps once in a thousand attempts. But that is probably a hundred times more frequently than I would make it, even allowing for the fact that I would never have reached it in the first place. We can declare that someone is lucky without also implying that they aren't great. After all, Federer is surely great, but on this occasion, he was as surely unlucky. So it goes: that's tennis.

In any case, it wasn't bad luck that had brought Federer to match point down. At 4/3 in the fourth set, he earned yet another break point on Nadal's serve, clocked a strong return, and teed off on a crosscourt forehand. It missed wide by inches. On the next

point Nadal rolled in a first serve to Federer's backhand, as he had all night, earned a short return, and teed off on a crosscourt forehand. It landed in by precisely the same distance that his opponent's had missed. This had nothing to do with Nadal kicking heavy balls over Federer's shoulders (a sumptuous image), and everything to do with one guy's strongest shot outperforming the other guy's strongest shot. The metonymy was irrefutable, and definitive.

Interviewed afterwards, Nadal was typically gracious, and effusive in his praise of Federer, whom he happily compared to Rod Laver (who had by then surely left the building). Asked what advice he would give Andy Murray for tomorrow night's semifinal, he suggested the Scot 'be more aggressive,' before admitting with a chuckle that his advice probably wasn't up to much, given he'd lost to Djokovic six times in a row. As for Federer, he was clearly flattened as he left the court, but seemed more upbeat by the time he'd gain the more depressing confines of the press room. Indeed, he cut an appreciably chirpier figure than the pensive and curt one from twelve months ago, following his loss to Djokovic. As he remarked wryly to one reporter, 'I haven't lost in five months. Don't feel too sorry for me.'

The Energy Crisis

Australian Open, Semifinal (Day Twelve)

(1) Djokovic d. (4) Murray, 6/3 3/6 6/7 6/1 7/5

If tennis matches had soundtracks - and this is certainly a matter worth lobbying the ITF about - tonight's semifinal would have to be scored by Philip Glass, in his full early-minimalist splendour. Minimalism is a technique in which great complexity is wrought by repetitively permutating quite simple musical building blocks, in much the same way that Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray tonight produced a sustained and dramatic five set tussle while only rarely deviating from a one-dimensional baseline approach. Djokovic took the opportunity to apologise to Rod Laver afterwards. If Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer last night composed a minor masterpiece in four contrasting movements, Djokovic and Murray's effort was closer to *Einstein on the Beach*, inspiring a similarly pacifying loss of self-will in onlookers.

Channel 7, those unsurpassed masters of silver linings and tabloid guff, were not slow in applying a positive spin to Lleyton Hewitt's loss back in the fourth round. The good news - and there was an immediate promo to highlight this for us - was that Hewitt would be re-joining the commentary team, and he would bring his various insights, and verbal tics - 'tremendous ball striking', 'extremely well' - with him. Naturally tonight's match

featured plenty of balls being tremendously struck, and both protagonists went about any number of their assigned tasks well, often extremely so. But Hewitt has added a new term to his catalogue of stock phrases, which is 'energy'. By the second set, he was mentioning how Murray was or wasn't 'drawing energy from his player's box' so often that it was as though he believes it's a thing, and not merely a metaphor, as though Kim Sears and Ivan Lendl were actually narrow-casting charged particles at the Scot. Hewitt also admonished Murray at one point for not hitting with enough 'eviction'. It was, admittedly, a relief from the otherwise unbroken stream of clichés. In other words, Hewitt has slotted right in.

By this point Djokovic was beginning visibly to struggle, seemingly from the same respiratory issue that had afflicted him in his quarterfinal match. The world No.1 indicated imploringly to his box that he couldn't breathe. Misreading his gestures, they continued transmitting 'energy', when what he really needed was oxygen. The message didn't really get through until the fourth set, and by then their man was well down. Courier put the energy issue to Djokovic in the on-court interview: 'Where did you get your energy from?' Perhaps the metaphor holds little currency in Serbia: 'Energy drinks, water, bananas?' It earned him a laugh from the punch-drunk Rod Laver Arena crowd, whose affections had been courted ardently by both men as the fifth set wore down, via a series of direct and utterly heart-felt appeals. Channel 7's latest gratuitous gimmick - the Decibel Meter - had very nearly overheated from all the energy directed its way. It reached something like 108, which long experience with meaningless numbers tells me is more than 107, but beyond that I cannot say, since to the television viewer such numbers are just a useless abstraction. 108 decibels is loud, I suppose?

Afterwards, there was much chatter of how much this match will mean for Murray, and how a respectable loss in the semifinal will harm him less than a shabby one in the final did in the last few years. The good news is that both Donald Young and Alex Bogomolov Jnr had breakthrough seasons last year, so even if Murray loses to them again it will represent progress of sorts. To be fair, Murray was frequently wonderful tonight, and it wasn't merely breathing issues that allowed him to push Djokovic to five sets. His fight-back from 2/5 down in the fifth was especially stirring, although I can imagine he will relive those wasted breakpoints at 5/5 for some time to come. That's how trauma works, and he seems prone to it.

As for Djokovic, he joins Nadal in the final of a third consecutive Major, the first time two men have achieved this feat in the Open Era. Should he overcome Nadal, it will be his third straight Major title, and his seventh straight final victory over the Spaniard. The question will be fitness, and energy, but not the symbolic kind that hums through tennis

stadiums. Cast your mind back to the Foro Italico last year, when Djokovic was driven to the brink by Murray in the semifinal, yet retained the wherewithal to defeat Nadal the following day. The time-frames and the exhaustion are more telescoped in a Masters event, but he'll need to pull off something similar here in Melbourne. He's the man to do it. He'll just have to strike the ball tremendously, compete extremely well, and receive plenty of energy from his support team. And oxygen. He'll need that, too.

This is Tennis

Australian Open, Final

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

Insofar as the longest major final in history can have just one defining moment, that moment in tonight's final arrived with Rafael Nadal serving at 3/4 in the fourth set. Novak Djokovic, whose potency on return had been under rapid development for an hour, suddenly launched a furious assault on the Spaniard's serve, earning 0-40: three break points, and virtually match points, given the inexorability of the match's flow. It had been a fine final, entirely worthy of a fine event, and slotting encouragingly into the existing narrative of the rivalry: Djokovic is in Nadal's head, the match-up favours the world No.1. You know how it goes.

Despite commencing with precisely the aggressive mindset he had advised to Andy Murray to employ - dictate with the forehand, and ride the baseline - Nadal had thereafter spent the better part of two sets retreating and scurrying, often lurking in Monfils' preferred territory adjacent to the back hoardings. The feeling of having his back to the wall had therefore grown wearily familiar. From 0-40 Nadal characteristically forced the imminence of his defeat to one side, and set about lashing a series of furious winners from both wings and on serve to hold. The inevitability of the world No.1's victory abated. The heavens, shocked, began gently to weep, speckling the court, and the players fled as Rod Laver Arena's monstrous roof ground gradually shut. It only needed another fireworks display to really ram the momentum change home. This moment proved to be the pivot around which the entire match swung, and although it did not determine the winner - since Nadal still lost - it did enable this final to evolve into one of the most dramatic, exacting, aggravating, and painful matches in the sport's history.

There is a sense in which the winner is irrelevant following matches such as these, although it is glib to say so, and misleading to overstate it. Winning still matters, and given the choice Nadal would surely trade his starring role in a classic final for the trophy

itself. Nevertheless, both players afterwards spoke movingly and genuinely of their pride at having produced so monumental a spectacle. Nadal suggested that this is why they play tennis. Djokovic, clutching the Norman Brooks Challenge Cup, knew a better reason, but he too was effusive and generous in his praise. Both knew they'd given almost everything, and that none could fault them for effort.

Perhaps we cannot fault Nadal's industry, but his tactics deserve some examination, or, more specifically, his unwillingness to stick with the approach that had delivered him a taut, nervous and frankly low-quality opening set. Having thus established his lead, Nadal, for no discernible reason, retreated, abandoning the baseline and with it any hope of imposing himself on the match. The Spaniard's winner count plummeted in sets two and three, as Djokovic obligingly stepped in and increased his pace, hustling his opponent from the court. The rout was on. For the first time that I can recall, Nadal looked forlorn and impotent, a young man still, but one whom the race was over-running.

But we perhaps pay too much attention to such considerations. We deride Nadal's retreat, but he was close to winning the match, and it wasn't an overly defensive mindset that made him miss that crucial backhand pass late in the fifth. (The same may be said for Federer: widely condemned for his recklessly unstructured semifinal, he was still inches away from serving for the fourth set.) The fact is, Nadal proved mighty, and mightily competitive, doing what he knows best. It has delivered him ten Majors, although I should add it has delivered him three consecutive runner-ups as well. Jim Courier, well into the fifth, began to rant once more about Nadal's lamentable court-positioning (with good reason), but stopped himself with a chuckle: 'Man, this stuff is easy from in here.' After nearly 350 minutes on court, nothing was easy for either player anymore, and clear thinking was the last thing anyone should have expected of them.

At the end, addled, it was Djokovic who buried a final forehand winner and collapsed to the court with unimaginably weary triumph, before lurching up to embrace Nadal, and then tear the shirt from his body, much as Andrew Ilie did when he didn't win the Australian Open. Nadal, in the dark place beyond disappointment, removed his shirt more carefully, since his team has strict rules about respecting equipment, and probably because he didn't feel in the mood. The crowd, their own energy-levels approaching total-depletion, redirected their remaining reserves towards one final frenzy. Channel 7's patented and pointless Crowd Meter registered 116dB, which I gather meant it was very loud, although this was pretty clear from the noise coming through my speakers. Blissfully, it was the only noise coming through, the commentators having fallen hushed. On AO Radio, the heroic duration and wretched hour were wrecking voices and

scrambling minds. Even the clichés wouldn't come: 'Really, it's a shame someone has to win,' intoned the announcer, before correcting himself. Everyone knew they had witnessed something special, a true epic, and arguably the greatest final the Australian Open has known.

A Matter of Time

The headline-generating topic of the 2012 Australian Open has been noise, specifically the concern that rather too much of it periodically emanates from the shapely throats of several women players. The controversy reached a fevered pitch when two of the worst offenders progressed to the final, whereupon the taller one came to a screeching halt. Despite the earnest efforts of those eager to stir up controversy, the sound and fury achieved little beyond incensing a few talk-back callers, who duly said their piece. In any case, it hardly constitutes a serious issue. I suspect committed tennis fans have long since learned to block the shrieks out. I know I have. Of far greater concern, though far less discussion was the speed of play in the men's event, which as the draw pared down grew increasingly glacial. While the rallies were furious and fascinating, the space around each one became excessively vast, as though each frenzied exchange required adequate time before and after for genuine contemplation, or a quick nap.

The statistic flashed up after the second set of last night's men's final that Novak Djokovic was averaging 30 seconds between each point; Rafael Nadal 33 seconds. Pascal Maria, the chair umpire, bestowed an unofficial warning upon both players, a tactic perfectly designed to make no difference whatsoever. By that measure, it worked. If the goal was that they actually get on with it, however, why not just deliver an official time violation warning? That's why it is a warning - it doesn't cost idling players anything, but simply cautions them that further transgressions will result in a point penalty. Stale talk of an on-court shot-clock was once again brought out for an airing, and duly beaten with a stick. Chris Bowers was opposed to it on the grounds of its inflexibility: some points are so gruelling that the allotted 20 seconds is insufficient time to recover. Pat Cash favours it, because watching athletes gather tennis balls, towel off, and extract their underwear is even less exciting than it sounds.

The upshot is that Djokovic and Nadal, who number among the slowest players on tour, will always have an innate advantage when it comes to posting time-based records. Last night's final was the longest final in grand slam history, and the longest match ever played at the Australian Open. They already hold the record for the longest best-of-three match in history, which they achieved in Madrid in 2009, a four and a half hour grind featuring endless sojourns behind the baseline and a number of medical timeouts, and

which only came alive in its final minutes. Tonight's match clocked in at 5hrs 53mins - Djokovic posed next to the clock with the trophy afterwards - though I suspect this number includes the 10-15 minute delay while the roof was closed in the fourth set. Whether it does or not, I would be curious to know how much time was spent actually playing tennis (as compared with, say, Djokovic's semifinal against Murray), although nowhere near curious enough to find out for myself. Notwithstanding that such records are not particularly meaningful, a better way to measure them would be to record only the time while the ball is in play.

In lieu of some dull hours with a stopwatch, we can hazard an educated guess. There were 369 points played in last night's final. Of those points, 56 occurred at the end of a game or set (as well as one during the changeover in the fourth set tiebreaker). Assuredly, there is scope in those situations to further retard play, but for now I'll ignore those points. That leaves 313 points. For the sake of argument, let's say Djokovic and Nadal averaged about 30 seconds between points, which is ten seconds more than the allotted limit as set out in the rules. In reality, they justifiably availed themselves of ever-longer breathers as that fifth set wore down, but I'll leave it at a conservative 30 seconds. Simple maths tells us that $313 \times 10 = 3,130$ seconds, or a touch over 52 minutes. In other words, in last night's final, there were at least 52 minutes when the players weren't playing, but according to the rules should have been. That's a lot of extra time spent watching very fit men not play tennis.

To the contention that sufficiently dramatic tennis renders this issue null, I am happy to concede. I didn't notice the time between points at all in the fifth set, when it was stretched farthest. But the first two sets took two and half hours, with neither extending to a tiebreak. You may be sure that fewer people witnessed the electrifying fourth and fifth sets than might have been the case had the lightning struck sooner.

It seems undeniable to me that in this case there is a disjunction between many players' actions and the rule intended to govern those actions, not helped by a level of official enforcement that oscillates from toothlessness to woeful inconsistency, without ever going beyond either. Now it may be that the rule is wrong, and that 20 seconds is on average not enough time to recover from today's increasingly demanding points, and the extended rallies encouraged by universally slow courts. (Fans of Federer should be careful when parading his name at this point, just because he plays quickly. Those who exalt him for being unique cannot therefore hold him up as being typical, and he would be the first to insist that rules should not reflect any single player.) If the rule is wrong, then it needs to be changed. If it isn't then it needs to be enforced. If a 'shot-clock' is the best way, then so be it. I have no doubt it can be made to work, given adequate will.

None of this is intended to diminish the monumental achievements of either player, or the outstanding match they collaborated on in the Australian Open final. Talk of where it rates among the greatest matches of all time has been premature. Djokovic was eager to insist it was the greatest match he has ever contested, and I won't presume to disagree with him. It is unquestionably the finest match he has ever played against Nadal, which may sound backhanded, but shouldn't considering they had met 29 times before last night. It was a great match, but its greatness owed to the skill, endurance, sportsmanship, and determination of its protagonists, and the drama, context, and shape of its unfolding. There are many things a great match must have - and this one had it all - but a big number on the match clock isn't one of them.

Moments in the Box

At the risk of courting controversy, and in the full awareness that sunstroke may finally have bested my wits, I contend that the coverage of this year's Australian Open was better than it has been in years. For all that I have no problem with Mats Wilander, his terrible accident on the eve of the tournament saved Eurosport from growing too tiresome in the first week. Mats can grow wearing when not taken in moderation. Barbara Schett can grow wearing in about six seconds flat, but I avoided her. ESPN was as ever festooned with onscreen clutter and a cloying earnestness all its own, but was otherwise no cheesier than usual. The continued absence of John Alexander did Channel 7 no harm (he is now a member of the Australian federal parliament). Joanna Griggs was caught charmingly with her guard down, Jim Courier seemed unusually preoccupied, and Bruce McAveney was oddly diffident. AO Radio was as ever the pick of the lot, especially when that roguish raconteur Craig Willis was on air.

Channel 7's best moment, through being its least mediated, came during the semifinal between Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer, when they crossed to their temporary man in the stands, Patrick Rafter. It was the position usually occupied by Todd Woodbridge or Roger Rasheed. It proved to be a nice change to have Rafter's comments. Despite emanating from a former world No.1, two-time Major champion, and current Australian Davis Cup captain, the comments were anything but expert. By his own sheepish admission, Rafter doesn't actually watch much tennis, and he had never before lingered courtside while Federer and Nadal went at each other. It has been eleven years since Rafter retired at the top of the game - he contested the 2001 Masters Cup - and the wonder in his voice made it clear just how far tennis has come in that time. He sounded boyishly shocked, in genuine awe at the quality of the hitting, the fleetness across the surface, at the intensity. Back in the bunker, Courier consoled Hewitt that he still had to

plays these guys, and joked that he and Rafter had retired at the right time. The light-heartedness of Rafter's agreement was tempered by emphatic sincerity. He sounded genuinely relieved.

Darren Cahill, ESPN's colour man for the match, was ensconced beside Rafter in the camera-pit. It was at this point that he leaned over and remarked that Nadal's backhand was close to breaking down. Rafter dutifully relayed this to the Australian viewers, his only expert comment for the night, although he would have done better to relay it to Federer. (Presumably Paul Annacone had spotted the issue as well, but sadly the only way for him to get a message on to court was via Uncle Toni. I submit that Federer's coach tried, but the instructions were sabotaged en route. This explains why Federer kept approaching to the wrong wing.)

The honour for the strangest commentary moment must go to AO Radio, and in particular Richard Evans. Being an online service, AO Radio boasts the dubious advantage of a tighter integration with social media than traditional broadcasters, although Channel 7 ran it close via its digital lobotomy service 'Fango'. AO Radio listeners were encouraged to send in questions via their iPhone app, which were then answered by the commentators. The rest of us were thus afforded the pleasure of hearing expert tennis broadcasters fielding questions whose answers could be easily found on the internet in a fraction of the time, such as 'How old is Fernando Verdasco?'. It was rather like asking Jamie Oliver round to whip your children up some jam sandwiches. Mostly the questions were the *ne plus ultra* of inanity, but occasionally they transcended even that.

I think it may have been during Serena Williams' upset to Ekaterina Makarova that a blind listener contacted them, although how anyone lacking sight had navigated the app was not explored. In spite of his or her visual impairment - which I gathered was total - this listener emphatically declared their love for tennis. Furthermore, in order to share that love, they were undertaking to create a tennis game, in order to accurately simulate the experience of tennis for other blind people. My first, decidedly uncharitable, thought was that a blind person's experience of tennis surely consists of a lot of air swings and the occasional ball to the face. It was not revealed whether the game would involve cards, or computers, or glass beads. Whatever the medium, the project was well underway, apparently, but there were a few details to be worked out, and could the AO Radio announcers please help out. A global listenership was then treated to Richard Evans - a war, political and sports journalist with half a century's experience - explaining a range of different tennis strokes to someone who will never see them, so that they

might integrate them into a game for other people who will never see them, either. I can't shake the feeling that it was all a set up.

The Golden Swing and the US Spring (Part One)

In Praise of Certainty

One year ago, Kevin Anderson's most pressing concern was to avoid goring himself on his maiden trophy at the SA Tennis Open, a trophy that bore a suspicious resemblance to a pair of gold-inlaid impala horns attached to a hunk of wood, with a golden tennis ball suspended between them. Upon surviving the presentation, he donated a portion of his prize money to assisting orphaned rhinos, presumably making good on an earlier rash promise to God. The SA Tennis Open has since been excised from the Tour, and yesterday Anderson lost a toenail in one of those freak shower door mishaps you read about in the papers. All of this is true. Think about it.

The SA Tennis Open, or Jo'burg as it was affectionately known among its six or seven fans, was this year replaced by the Open Sud de France in Montpellier. Presuming you aren't Anderson, an unemployed Jo'burg organiser, or those aforementioned fans, you would have to say the substitution has been a successful one. Montpellier's field is strong for a 250 level event, and particularly so for an event huddled in the lee of the year's first Major. (This was always prominent among Jo'burg's shortcomings; it proved impossible to entice marquee names to South Africa the day after the Australian Open wrapped up.) There are several reasons for this, some more obvious than others.

Firstly, it is much easier for a player to commit to a tournament that takes place near his home, and for many in the Montpellier draw, home is very near indeed. It's dense with Frenchmen. There was at least one in every second round match. Zagreb, also underway, is similarly replete with locals (and Russians), while Viña del Mar boasts its share of South Americans (and lesser Spaniards). This has hardly gone unremarked.

Being a tournament director is probably a stressful job at the best of times. Directing an event occurring immediately after (or before) a Major must inspire stomach-wall to stomach-wall ulcers. Recall Halle last year, when Roger Federer pulled out on the first Monday, citing a groin strain he'd sustained in the Roland Garros final. Halle's director, Ralf Weber, famously dropped his bundle at hearing the news, since Federer's presence had for a year formed the centrepiece of the tournament's entire promotional campaign. Weber insisted he was 'stunned', though it's hard to believe he hadn't seen the writing on the wall as the French Open final ground into its fourth hour. It was a perfect example of loading far too many eggs into one basket, even if that basket was a five time former champion with a lifetime contract. The tournament has since vigorously and

successfully pursued Rafael Nadal for 2012. In terms of advertising, it's good to see they've learned their lesson.

The lesson, really, is that uncertainty is crippling when you're trying to plan and market a substantial event around the presence of star athletes with recalcitrant bodies. Imagine how much easier it would be if you knew in advance which players would be playing on the final weekend of a major, and would thus be unserviceable the week after. Knowing who the semifinalists would be, one could thus feel safe in securing the services of everyone else. The players themselves could make better plans, certain in the knowledge that they would not be inconveniently exhausted from a chance run to a slam final.

There is any number of downsides to having the same four players contest the semifinals at every single Major in perpetuity until the heat-death of the sun. But we would be remiss not to acknowledge the advantages, as well. This calibre of certainty might kill off fan interest in the long-term, but in the short-term, it's precisely the thing investors love, and procuring the services of a top ten player is an investment. The Montpellier organisers could rest assured that, come what may, top seed Tomas Berdych would front up, hale and polished. Their hearts may have skipped a beat as he struck that volley to move up two sets to love against Nadal in last week's Australian Open quarterfinal, but I'm sure they had faith. More importantly, they had certainty, and the volley landed wide.

Jelly Bean Platters

Montpellier, Final

(1) Berdych d. (3) Monfils, 6/2 4/6 6/3

Discounting Queens - which makes green hay the week after Roland Garros, owing to a perfect storm of prestige and a cruelly short grass season - no tournament placed directly after a Major deserves a final as good as the one played in Montpellier today between Tomas Berdych and Gael Monfils. Zagreb was closer to the usual mark, where a vastly more experienced and bearded Mikhail Youzhny saw off an overwhelmed first time finalist. However, regardless of location, being European indoor tournaments there was truly only one possible outcome: beaming figures hoisting trophies that resemble low-budget set-dressing, awash in the kind of light that makes winter tennis possible but deprives human skin of its essential flesh-tones. This was frankly a blow for Berdych, whose engineers are justifiably proud of their pioneering work in epidermal synthesis.

I have already outlined how Montpellier contrived to assemble so impressive a draw, despite commencing just hours after the Australian Open wrapped up. Favourable geography enabled a strong French contingent, and in Tsonga's absence Gael Monfils proved to be the strongest of those. Meanwhile, a near-run quarterfinal loss in Melbourne secured Berdych's appearance. Thus rested and repaired, he was untouchable in taking down his half of the draw, including a semifinal victory over Philipp Kohlschreiber in which the Czech failed to drop a point on first serve. By contrast, Monfils barely scraped through, saving a match point in beating Gilles Simon. On form alone, Berdych was today's heavy favourite. Notwithstanding that both players boasted losing records in finals, few can realistically hope to match Monfils in this department. He is infinitely virtuosic when it comes to blowing title matches. Balanced against this was the putative home-court advantage, although this sometimes only inspires Monfils to attain more ecstatic heights of showmanship.

Initially, it didn't inspire him to much at all. Camped on the slick pink paddock beyond the baseline, and faced with an aggressive and experienced top ten player, Monfils wisely opted for a restrained and enervated approach, which enabled him to fall behind immediately. This brilliant tactic also worked to take the crowd out of the mix, which further emboldened Berdych, who set about smashing the ball into the corners unimpeded. With the atmosphere drained from the complex, the top seed went about his task with devastating and silent efficiency. A doggedly upbeat soundtrack at the sit-downs – including *Black Betty* and Blur's *Song No.2* – did little to enliven proceedings. Berdych broke again to take the set. Monfils had managed to win just 20% on second serves. This rather refuted the belief, cherished in some quarters, that fast surfaces unduly favour the server, although we must bear in mind that conventional wisdom counts for little with Monfils.

There was no good reason to believe Berdych wouldn't sustain his imposing level, since he had all week. Monfils' fighting hold at the beginning of the second set was thus vital, if not pivotal. He was still holding on, but less grimly. Somehow Monfils broke Berdych, exploiting the Czech's poorest service game in a week and a half, and served out the second set. The Frenchman seemed to be gaining strength, defying history, form, statistics, expectations and intuition. That's a lot of defiance to maintain, and it turned out to be too much. He double-faulted to gift away the crucial break. In the end, I suppose character really is destiny. You don't achieve a 4-13 record in finals by playing against type.

The upside, if he chooses to see it, is that Monfils now has the complete set of Montpellier trophies, which might conceivably create storage issues. I suppose they

could double as jelly bean platters at a pinch. They've also been overhauled since the tournament was last staged in 2010. The latest iterations look like the old ones have been messily devouring a test-pattern. You can't buy that kind of workmanship, at least not without frequenting high-school craft fairs.

Zagreb, Final

(3) Youzhny d. Lacko, 6/2 6/3

Last November, Mikhail Youzhny earned his PhD from the University of Moscow. The Colonel is now a doctor. Since graduating he has clearly devoted considerable effort to cultivating a student beard of lush and special magnificence. There is some kind of irony here, although it probably doesn't exceed the bounds of a classic Yakov Smirnoff formulation. Nevertheless, said facial hair proved unstoppable in today's Zagreb final, even for the dashing Lukas Lacko.

En route to the final - his first at tour level - Lacko had taken down enough seeds that it could technically be termed a 'spree', although unlike Montpellier the Zagreb field was not strong. Sadly, he had no answer for Youzhny today. Lacko insisted he hadn't been nervous, which was commendable of him, if not particularly convincing. He certainly *looked* nervous, and it is entirely understandable that he would be. It cannot have been calming seeing that bristling growth hiding his opponent's face. He was a boy facing a man.

Youzhny, however, looked like a former top ten player rediscovering some of his best form, which was enormously heartening to see. This is his eighth career title, and first since October 2010. He later teamed up with Marcos Baghdatis to claim his ninth doubles title. It was a good day to be bearded.

The Outward Display of Prestige

In the scheme of things, awards ceremonies mean little. That Novak Djokovic won the Laureus World Sportsman of the Year Award tells us nothing about his 2011 season that we didn't already know, although I suppose more people might now know it. If nothing else, it has provided a handy pretext for everyone associated with tennis to stridently assert the primacy of the sport. It's a hard point to refute, given that a tennis player has won the award six times in the past eight years. (The other two awards went to Usain Bolt, twice, a decision that was difficult to fault.) I should add that those six awards remain the *only* times a tennis player has taken out the male category. One may

wonder why, say, Rod Laver never won it. The answer is that he began his tennis career about four decades too early.

The Laureus Awards have only been around for 12 years, although from the outset it has set out to confound, or at least circumvent, the maxim that from little things big things grow. It started out big, and strove mightily to make up for a lack of tradition with displays of prestige's outward trimmings - the winner's statuettes are Cartier confections - in the justified hope that ostentation will tide things over until real prestige, which only comes with time, arrives. It is small the way the Nuremberg Rally was, and as carefully stage-managed. One imagines Albert Speer would have approved. This year's awards were staged in London, and hosted by the astoundingly charming Clive Owen, who has taken over from Kevin Spacey.

Nonetheless, while the ceremony itself is glamorous twaddle, the processes by which the nominees and the eventual winner are decided are reassuringly rigorous. The initial nominations are determined by leading members of the world's sporting media, in a sufficiently broad cross-section that nationalistic and disciplinary biases are subsumed. The actual winner is decided by a secret vote - overseen by PricewaterhouseCoopers - of the 47 member committee, comprising a selection of the greatest sportspeople the world has known, including the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Tony Hawk and Steve Waugh. These, again, represent a wide range of sports and nations, although they are predominantly men. Including the chairman (Edwin Moses), athletics sees the best representation, with nine members. Tennis is well-represented, with five. The United States, unsurprisingly, has the most representatives of any nation, both among the media and the committee. Despite this, and despite the fact that Americans generally perform well across the various categories - Kelly Slater has won the 'Action' category four times - the Laureus remains largely unreported in the States, even though the USA as a nation seems to attach more value to awards ceremonies than most. This fatal lack of interest presumably owes to the Laureus' inclusion of sportspeople from the benighted parts of the globe - i.e. everywhere else - and because the award could never go to a university basketball coach. Elsewhere in the world it goes unreported because it's an annual awards ceremony that isn't the Oscars. This seems to be the way of things. I am a writer, yet I cannot tell you who won the Nobel Prize for Literature last year. But I know without checking that Colin Firth won Best Actor.

Roger Federer famously won the Laureus award four times in a row between 2005 and 2008, while Rafael Nadal took it in 2010. Now Novak Djokovic has it. The question has been raised - most succinctly by Ivan Ljubicic - of precisely what the powers that be are doing to capitalise on this, to translate global respect into the wholesale betterment of

the sport. Awards ceremonies admittedly don't mean much, but they could mean more if those powers were not so content merely to be. The top three male tennis players are among the most recognised sportspeople on the planet. Andy Murray, being British and therefore lauded and excoriated daily on some of the world's most visited websites, isn't far behind. Whatever their other shortcomings, none of these guys are stingy with their media commitments, and Djokovic's determination to embrace publicity exceeds even Federer's.

Nevertheless, it shouldn't only be about the top four, just as it shouldn't only be about the four Majors. That's arguably the real problem, the way global interest in tennis only stirs fitfully for the grand slams, and then only centres on the very top guys. Sometimes I question whether there is actually a mechanism by which all this accumulated prestige can trickle down, or whether tennis is too individualistic and too post-national to ever inspire frenzied adulation in general fans for other players. Is this level of support intrinsic to the tribal conceit of team-based league sports, or to international contests?

In other words, is a re-formatted Davis Cup really tennis's best shot at the truly big time? It's question for another time. For now, congratulations to Novak Djokovic.

Davis Cup First Round

Tactics and Execution

Day One

Fish d. Wawrinka, 6/2 4/6 4/6 6/1 9/7

Isner d. Federer, 4/6 6/3 7/6 6/2

Last year's Davis Cup first round was as crushingly dull as it was predictable, or crushingly dull because it was predictable, or crushingly, well . . . Even thinking about it envelops my brain in a dense miasma of indifference. The good news is that this year's instalment has been refreshingly different - an enervating and crisp zephyr to clear the fog away. Of course, plenty of the results have still gone as predicted.

The French, cunningly opting to field almost none of their top players, have had a tough time of it in Vancouver. Even without Djokovic, Serbia has somehow fought its way to a 2-0 lead against the Swedish dream-team of Ryderstedt and Prpic, ranked 348 and 1426 respectively. There was much made of Nadal's decision not to play Davis Cup in order to rest a wounded shoulder (presumably it isn't either of the shoulders he used in the Australian Open, both of which seemed fine). Characteristically, Ferrer's withdrawal elicited less fevered analysis. In any case, Ferrero and Almagro got the job done against Kazakhstan, eventually.

The talk, once the wreckage of the weekend has been hauled away, will be about the surfaces. Australia's choice of 'real' grass was a no-brainer. The modest Chinese team has barely threatened for a set at a time. The slick and low Geelong court is one that rewards variety - tailored for Tomic and Hewitt - and the Chinese players aren't terribly imposing even in the one dimension they have. As I write, they're emphatically losing the doubles rubber from the back of the court. Conversely, Germany stuffed up royally by laying down a clay court for the Argentinians, like a 78 foot welcome mat. Nalbandian and Monaco duly made themselves at home. Mayer professes to prefer the dirt, but his patented funk should translate readily to grass. Even if it doesn't, Petzschner and Haas are proven adepts on turf.

The most searching questions, however, will be asked of Switzerland, and their choice of high-altitude indoor clay for the home tie against the USA. Being Switzerland, they had little say in the matter of altitude - unless they annexed part of Eastern France for the weekend - and on the face of it the choice of red dirt seemed obvious when faced with

Mardy Fish, whose three worst surfaces are European, indoor and clay. The Swiss now find themselves 2-0 down, so the question begged is whether the obvious choice was the right one.

I suspect it was, and I also suspect that those pundits contending otherwise are going too far in seeking to justify Federer's disturbing loss to Isner, or, more accurately, Isner's stirring win over Federer. Isner afterwards insisted that as a big man, he rather enjoys slower courts, since it gives him time to set his feet and wind up his strokes. That mighty five set loss to Nadal in last year's French Open has been paraded as a clear precedent. What was Switzerland, or the tiny part of it involved in its Davis Cup campaign, thinking? They were thinking, quite correctly that clay is Wawrinka's preferred medium, and that while it may not be Federer's, he remains the second most accomplished performer on it this century. To the reasonable contention that neither man had set foot on it since Roland Garros, one could reasonably respond that neither had the Americans. In other words, the decision to inflict clay on the visitors was a tactical one, and it was the right one. The true problem lay in the execution, as it so often does.

Fish remarked during the week that the temporary Fribourg surface was of especially poor quality, that no two balls bounced even remotely the same. He was quick to quell any accusations of carping by pointing out that this helped the United States more than Switzerland, since these particular Americans are stylistically inclined to hit only one good shot per rally, and hopefully no more. If it happens to be a first serve, all the better. It turns out Fish's analysis was astute. The quality of the surface made all the difference, and it is to the Jim Courier's credit that he noted this, and planned accordingly. He instructed Isner to unload whenever he had a shot he liked the look of, and to make it count. Isner was to treat that hacked-up clay court like a strange grass court, one that conferred the further benefits of allowing him to position himself, and of encouraging his second serve - the most monstrous in the sport - to rear over his opponent's shoulders.

Federer erred in not figuring this out, and by not conducting an old-school grass court match himself, up to and including serve-volleying. To the bitter end he confined himself to clay tactics, including the desperate ploy towards the death of receiving serve near the back hoarding. Severin Luthi, from his court-side vantage, should have noted the issue once the match was underway. That he was reduced by the end to hoping Isner started missing spoke volumes about how wrong the Swiss team had gotten it, and of how much they rely on Federer's brilliance to make up the difference. Perhaps they can

be forgiven, since the equation of Federer + Clay = Win had been endorsed by every betting agency in the world.

Nevertheless, as with the choice of surface, nailing the tactics means little if you cannot execute them. The biggest issue for the Swiss was that Isner was magnificent. Courier knew that his No.2 had precisely one shot at beating Federer, which was to play imposing first-strike tennis, and to never let up. He and Isner displayed absolute single-mindedness in honing the American's game for this purpose. Nothing extraneous to it was even practiced. 'This is how I should play all the time,' remarked Isner afterwards. Indeed he should.

The Swiss team remained typically sanguine afterwards, notwithstanding that they must now win all three remaining rubbers if they are to secure a tie they were yesterday certain to win. There is every chance that Federer and Wawrinka will return for the doubles, where the reigning Olympic champions will be encouraged by Bob Bryan's absence. Were they to win that, Team Suisse would surely fancy Federer's chances against Fish in the first of the reverse singles, which would force a deciding rubber between the potentially fatigued Wawrinka and the certainly lethal Isner. They may not fancy their chances in that one, but it's the only chance they have.

That Hackneyed Show-Tune

Day Three

Croatia d. Japan 3-2

Karlovic d. Soeda, 7/6 6/1 6/4

It wasn't the only story to emerge from the first Davis Cup weekend of the year, but the big story was of big men playing big man tennis. The steady, throbbing thud of monstered first serves striking canvas backstops was like an *ostinato* for the weekend, although the variations that unfolded above it were of considerable variety and surprising invention.

John Isner's four set victory over Roger Federer on Friday in Fribourg proved to be merely the most rousing elaboration of a theme that had already been established by Ivo Karlovic in Hyogo, at the poetically-named and gastronomically-irresistible Bourbon Beans Dome. Milos Raonic later chimed in, in Vancouver. The most feared servers in the sport – too many contend that a serve is all they have – were winning matches comfortably, with barely any recourse to tiebreaks. Unless they had somehow discovered how to break their opponent's serve using their own, this meant they were actually

making returns, as many as four per game. As fantastical as this sounds, various eyewitness reports have borne it out. It turns out the more derisive pundits knew less than they thought they did, which the rest of us knew anyway.

To my regret, I have occasionally numbered among them. I once joked that Karlovic should embroider '7/6' on his shirts, in much the same way other (unnamed) players do with 'RF' or 'Nole'. In my defence, Karlovic is a sufficiently sardonic guy that I could see him going for it. And yet, throughout a heroic weekend in Japan - the details of which I am gradually coming to - he only once had recourse to a breaker. He outplayed Kei Nishikori from the ground, on Decoturf, at the fabled Bourbon Beans Dome. This proved merely a prelude to beating everyone else. He won all three points in Croatia's victory, although he might conceivably have had a partner in the doubles. Indeed, we can blame that partner - the perpetually rumped Ivan Dodig - for a single dropped set, marring Karlovic's otherwise perfect record.

Sadly, since he doesn't play for the United States or Spain or France, Karlovic's performance in Japan will go largely overlooked. This is unfortunate, since on those special occasions when he can find the court, his ground game is a delight. Beyond that, the act of leading his nation in the absence of Ljubicic or Cilic was a colossal achievement for a veteran nearing 33, still making his way back from injury.

And he did it almost unaided. Dodig can usually be relied upon for maniacal commitment if not transcendent ability, yet his efforts in both singles rubbers lacked his characteristic grit. Against Nishikori, this can be forgiven readily, since Nishikori outranks him handily, and will periodically prove unplayable. Against Go Soeda, however, forgiveness was more provisional, carefully withheld until Karlovic had casually claimed the fifth and deciding rubber. Last year, in the midst of an especially disastrous personal effort, Janko Tipsarevic remarked that it was nice to have teammates to cover for him: 'Even when you feel and play like crap, your team mates are there to fix the problem.' He was not wrong. It *is* nice, especially when the teammate is Novak Djokovic, or even Viktor Troicki (for whom Djokovic will blithely substitute himself given the chance). Who could have imagined that Dodig might discover that same security in Karlovic?

The best thing about these weekends is that there is always at least one performance to inspire a bellowed rendition of that hackneyed show-tune *This Is What Davis Cup Is All About*. The worst thing is that there is so often only one. This last weekend, there were plenty, and Ivo Karlovic had us singing the loudest of all.

The Golden Swing and the US Spring (Part Two)

Empty Bleachers

Sao Paulo, First Round

(Q) Andreev d. (WC) Gonzalez, 6/2 6/3

Although the chances are good that later events will run it close, the award for least surprising news of the week must so far go to Fernando Verdasco's decision to forgo the SAP Open in San Jose. Notwithstanding that he was the 2010 champion - the fourth of only five career titles - I can see how he might have soured on the place.

Last year San Jose became the ninth of Verdasco's eleven career runner-ups, and it was arguably the most memorable of the lot as he brought falling short to an agonising new level of intensity. Especially unforgettable was the surliness with which he finally succumbed to the virginal Milos Raonic, and his subsequent self-righteousness in blaming everyone but himself. He then enshrined the result by losing again to Raonic in Memphis the following week, although this only confirmed the Spaniard in his certainty that he was losing because his opponent refused to play 'real tennis', an unworthy thought he foolishly relayed to the attendant press. It was a performance and an attitude ill-befitting a member of the top ten, and so it was in some ways appropriate that his inexorable descent from that lofty position began immediately. He has since plummeted all the way to No.27, but San Jose was where the slide began.

This year he finds himself in Sao Paulo, where a relatively weak draw has yielded Verdasco the No.3 seeding. Nicolas Almagro returns to mount a title-defence. Thomaz Bellucci is the local hope. Nevertheless, the main story was Fernando Gonzalez, until he lost. It's hard to say what the story will be now. I'll offer the controversial opinion that David Nalbandian is a better player than his ranking of No.84 suggests, and the bold prediction that he will meet Almagro in the final. The rather shorter view is that his first round match against the outrageously talented Benoit Paire will be worth staying up or waking up for, depending on your location. Brazilians or those in geosynchronous orbit can make their own arrangements, I suppose.

Rotterdam, First Round

Youzhny d. Kunitsyn, 6/0 6/7 6/0

There are three tournaments running concurrently this week, although it's unfair on two of them that the third is Rotterdam, which usually ranks with the best of the 500 events.

The top draws are Roger Federer, Tomas Berdych and Juan Martin del Potro, who has finally returned to the top ten, where he truly belongs, though not to the top four, where so many are convinced he belongs. Three of the eight seeds have already departed - Dolgoplov, Lopez and Granollers - as have most of the locals. Mikhail Youzhny has already won his first round match, with the most curious double bagel. Since claiming Zagreb a week ago, the Russian's beard has already evolved from merely magnificent to downright *vengeful*. Sadly, Ivan Ljubicic's farewell tour is going about as well as Gonzalez'. The Croatian is out too.

San Jose, First Round

(6) Anderson d. Dimitrov, 2/6 7/6 7/6

Meanwhile, over in San Jose, Grigor Dimitrov's young career has already progressed from narrowly choking away tough matches he should probably win, to blowing ones he certainly should. In his determination to emulate Federer's career, he appears to have skipped the outrageously successful part in the middle. He was superior to Kevin Anderson in almost every aspect of the sport, with the sole exception being the tiebreak. The first set recalled Dimitrov's hiding of Mardy Fish at the Hopman Cup. The second and third sets recalled too many other Dimitrov moments to mention. He looked assured and elegant throughout, until the tiebreaks, when he looked inexperienced, which is ironic because these are exactly the situations he constantly finds himself in. The trick is to win before the sudden-death moment. That way you don't have to suddenly die. I don't mean to shrug off Anderson so lightly - to consign him to obstacle status the way so many people do for Ivo Karlovic - but he began slowly and never really sped up. He played about as well in the third set as he had in the first. I suppose that's the point: Dimitrov didn't. Last year I suggested he should be in North America rather than Europe. Now I don't know what to think.

The organisers of the SAP Open have once again obtained the use of the HP Pavilion, which is apparently otherwise used to store empty bleachers. One presumes that by not clearing these away, the tournament received a discount, and saved themselves considerable effort. Certainly it sets off the action much better than having actual human beings watching.

As ever with American sporting events, there appears to be a concern that more than a few seconds of inactivity will cause the crowd to succumb to rigor mortis, or to develop revolutionary leanings, or something. As a consequence, relentless sensory assault was visited upon the dozen or so people in attendance at each change of ends. The best moment came when they were invited to watch a trio of animated tennis racquets

bounce on the Jumbotron, each emblazoned with a HP logo. The aim, I assume, was to see who could stare at flagrant self-promotion the longest without breaking down and weeping. The whole affair was enlivened by a corny announcer explaining things in infantile detail via a bone-shaking sound system. At one changeover Rick Astley's 'Never Gonna Give You Up' crooned out. My live stream went down for a little while after this. A Rickroll of this magnitude was enough to break the internet.

Worst-of-Three

Sao Paulo, Second Round

(3) Verdasco d. Marti, 6/4 6/7 7/5

Fernando Verdasco, in cahoots with Rafael Nadal, last year produced what was by broad consensus the worst tennis match of 2011, at the Cincinnati Masters. They are compatriots but they aren't friends, yet they set aside their mutual antipathy to prolong a merely tedious encounter into a three and a half hour epic of suck.

Although nominally a best-of-three match, it sent a clear warning that not only should woman be excused from playing best-of-five matches at Majors, quite a few of the men should be debarred from doing so, as well. One's heart quailed at the thought of two more sets. It was also a clear reminder that many players who share a nationality also submit to an informal hierarchy. As the match entered a third tiebreaker, it became obvious that there was no depth to which Nadal could sink that Verdasco could not exceed, until their race to the bottom reached the silt, muck and abandoned car bodies on the mire's bed. It turned out that Nadal can no more lose to Verdasco than Djokovic can lose to Troicki, or Federer to Wawrinka.

There are many things a match must have in order to rank among the very worst. In some respects, the worst matches are simply inversions of the best, those respects being the quality of the play and desperation of each player's endeavour. In others however, the worst matches share qualities with the finest, such as the resplendence of the occasion – poor quality is only magnified by the big stage – or through sheer length. However, regarding length, there is subtle point to be made. There is a real risk that a poor quality match, once it extends past 6/6 in the fifth, will gain a certain cachet, and thereby attain grandeur in spite of the quality of play. Arnaud Clement and Fabrice Santoro proved this some years ago at Roland Garros. Notwithstanding the odd execrable four-setter, it seems generally to be the case that the worst matches are senselessly long best-of-three setters. Or worst-of-three, as it were.

Any survey Verdasco's career conducted with less than total sympathy demonstrates his proven mastery of the worst-of-three format. Aficionados will recall his loss to Soderling in Rome last year, when he blew three match points, and the match, in a flurry of double faults. From memory, a bug also flew into his eye, and the lights went out. His sobriquet – *Fiasco* – was not earned ironically.

Today in Sao Paulo an early yet firm frontrunner for worst match of 2012 emerged, and Verdasco of course featured. Again the match was against a countryman, but, for a wonder, it was Verdasco that emerged the victor. Perhaps 'victor' is a bit strong. Let's just say he survived as the player who didn't lose, struggle though he did. Verdasco was surely as puzzled as everyone else by this outcome, but it was a case of the master being outdone by a true prodigy. A star is born, and his name is Javier Marti.

Fans of mind-searing, scrotum-tightening choking must have caught their collective breaths, stricken with wonderment. Verdasco – the undisputed heresiarch in this area – was a helpless onlooker as twenty-year-old Marti trumped his elder compatriot's efforts to lose at every turn. Verdasco, serving at 2/5 0-40 in the final set – once again he had deployed the double-fault lavishly – surely imagined he had found the bottom. Marti, equipped for the long haul, never allowed his inexperience to get the better of him. Squaring his shoulders, he actually burrowed *deeper*, discovering a hidden, decade-old cache of medical waste *below* the swamp-bed. From triple-match point up, Marti won three or four points in the next five games. Now *that's* how it's done.

Verdasco must have felt terribly old, as though the game was passing him by. This is what choking will look like in the future. How can he hope to compete? However, in a way, he should feel complimented, for imitation is the highest form of flattery. Marti has clearly studied his opponent at considerable length. Verdasco's influence was subtle and yet pervasive, evident in the sudden torrent of errors from the forehand, or the way Marti saved his final double fault for a key moment. One way or another, the legacy will live on.

A Fine Week in Holland

Rotterdam, Semifinal

(1) Federer d. Davydenko, 4/6 6/3 6/4

The last time Nikolay Davydenko took a set from Roger Federer was in the quarterfinal of the 2010 Australian Open, a notorious match that remains almost unique in the history of men's tennis. Like an exquisitely preserved clay pot whose hitherto un-

guessed-at technical perfection demands we reassess an entire civilisation, this match's archaeological value is incalculable. For the first time, we are able to pinpoint the precise moment at which a fine career collapsed. Sadly, we still cannot say why.

The decline of a great player is more commonly a vague, circuitous and debated procedure, defined by false trails, sudden collapses, sunsets mistaken for dawns, whispered speculation, soul-abrading media scrutiny and strident assertions of business-as-usual. Admittedly, Davydenko's plummet has included all of those, but really, the consensus is that it began as the Russian led Federer 6/2 3/1, and riding a two-match streak against the sport's greatest player. From there he lost 13 straight games, the match, and his will to compete. But if we can isolate the moment, we still cannot explain it. Until 3/1 in the second set, Davydenko was arguably the most in-form player in the world, and the purest ball-striker in the sport. Suddenly, he wasn't.

This week in Rotterdam Davydenko has, almost for the first glorious time in two long years, looked like his old self. His assured victory over Richard Gasquet, who played well and is justified in harbouring designs on the top ten, was particularly impressive. Eerily, Davydenko's momentum lasted until he again lead Federer by a set and 3/1. Federer had been outplayed until that point, but lifted to take the following five games, and the set. (Davydenko cunningly threw in an ill-conceived medical timeout in order to stall his own momentum). This was Davydenko's cue to fade. It is to his credit that he reapplied himself in the third.

The tennis was superb and desperate, owing to a pair of committed shot-makers on a delightfully-paced indoor court, and to a fully-engaged Dutch crowd. Davydenko's hands and Federer's feet were the standouts, as the Russian annexed the baseline and redirected the world No.3 to the corners. Federer's desperation was admirable, his effort unstinting, and his brilliance undimmed. He grabbed at a handful of breakpoints, but Davydenko grasped each firmly, wrenching them back. Then, at $\frac{3}{4}$ in the third set, Davydenko moved to 0-40 on Federer's serve. He only had a look-in on one of the three, and looked at a clean pass up the line. His backhand found the net. It proved decisive. Federer served his way to the hold, then broke Davydenko to love, a run of nine straight points. Was this the new Davydenko asserting himself once more? Let's not forget that before beating Federer twice, he had lost to him twelve times in a row. The old Davydenko generally fared no better.

If the 2010 Australian Open clearly precipitated Davydenko's fall, is it too much to hope that 2012 Rotterdam signals some kind of resurgence? Most narratives are of course false, and the best of them achieve perfection via a hermetic circularity such as this.

Real life is much richer, and its comings and goings harder to discern until later, when they are subsumed into the narrative we call the past. In *LA Story*, the great philosopher Steve Martin, echoing Sartre, wondered, 'Why is it that we don't always recognize the moment when love begins but we always know when it ends?' Davydenko, now thirty, is probably made of the wrong stuff to commence an Agassi-like second career, for all that the two broadly share a game-style and a hairstyle. However, if Davydenko was somehow to return to the top twenty, or even the top ten, we might one day come to believe that a fine week in Holland was where it all began, again.

The Twilight of the Ponies

Rotterdam, Final

(1) Federer d. (3) del Potro, 6/1 6/4

For no defensible reason, Juan Martin del Potro remains inextricably connected with Nikolay Davydenko in my mind. There are, of course, the striking physical similarities (I'm astonished Ivan Reitman has not yet cast them in *Twins 2*, a sequel begging to be made). However, in looking past this, I am faced with only incidental similarities, although these still add up to something, although it may only be the elementary realisation that even a meaningless association can be hard to rupture, assuming I had any reason to try.

They finished 2009 as the most fearsome two players in the world, with del Potro the US Open champion, and Davydenko the winner in Shanghai and London. Indeed, they squared off in the final match of the regular season – which is the last time they played – with the Russian inspiring an awestruck del Potro to his famous assertion that facing Davydenko was akin to playing a PlayStation on hard mode. I discoursed at some length the other day on Davydenko's subsequent plummet, which commenced about seven weeks later, in mid-afternoon in Melbourne. Del Potro's fall occurred almost simultaneously, as he lost to Marin Cilic three days earlier, stricken by the wrist injury that ended a season he'd barely begun. Davydenko's disappearance also featured an injured wrist, though whereas del Potro's was decisive, the Russian's injury shrouded some unfathomed existential malaise.

Two months earlier and half the world away, both men had beaten Roger Federer at the O2, and remain the only ones to have done so. Indeed, since that moment Federer has compiled a 36-1 record on indoor hardcourts. The sole loss was to Gael Monfils at Bercy in 2010, after holding five matchpoints. The most recent of the wins were against Davydenko in the Rotterdam semifinals yesterday, and against del Potro in the final

today. I know well enough that mere juxtaposition does not necessarily constitute meaning, but when coincidences pile up high enough, the resulting mound can sometimes look like an intended structure.

Until he crumbled today, the Tower of Tandil – del Potro’s unlovely, and presumably formal nickname – had looked to be an imposing edifice indeed. He had seen off Viktor Troicki in the quarterfinals for the loss of just one game. He had thrashed the in-form Tomas Berdych in the semifinals, the Czech’s second loss for the year. He had every reason to think he was a strong chance in the final, especially since Federer’s wins over Nieminen and Davydenko had been sternly fought, and not entirely convincing. Prevailing wisdom had it that Federer still smarted from his loss to Isner last week, and he’d touched down in Rotterdam to a circling media pack demanding an explanation for a few poorly translated remarks at the Davis Cup. Furthermore, the consensus was that Federer’s crushing win over del Potro at the Australian Open could be explained away as a bad day in savage conditions. A tight final was expected.

The opening game only confirmed this. Federer was serving first, but he wasn’t first-serving. He could barely find one, which was of concern, as his serve has lately provided a sure foundation, even when the structure above proved shaky. Del Potro looked assured. I suppose Federer did, too, but the Argentine’s game backed it up. There were break points, but they were saved. Eventually Federer found a first serve, and held. It wasn’t easy, as almost no service game today was. I can hardly recall Federer holding to love, which is hardly surprising, given he landed first serves at any uncharacteristically abyssal 49%. But del Potro wasn’t serving much better. The Argentine was broken in the next game, and again two games later. Federer moved to 5/0. Del Potro dodged the bagel by holding for the first time, but copped a breadstick the next game.

It would be wrong to say Federer’s game plan never varies when he faces a big man, because vary is precisely what it does. Spins and depths are perpetually altered, handcuffing flat drives are driven up the middle, and followed by gasp-inducing forehand drop shots – some crowds gasp at *anything* – which are themselves followed by Federer, gliding net-wards. As he does when facing Soderling, Federer’s idea is never to permit del Potro to plant his feet, even if it occasionally brings him undone. Several times in today’s final he sought the space behind the loping Tower – inanimate sobriquets always run into metaphorical trouble – only to find it hadn’t moved an inch. It’s hard to go behind a guy who doesn’t cover the open court. One forehand was held for an absurdly long time, as Federer waited in vain for his opponent to amble to the invitingly pristine hectares in the backhand corner. Whether through design or laziness, Del Potro stayed put, and eventually won the point. But for each of those, and for each enticing low slice

that del Potro belted for a winner, there were five or ten others that eventually won Federer the rally. There is a winsomely innocent tendency for Delpo's fans to believe their man saves his worst for Federer, but it has happened enough times in the last twelve months that ignoring his opponent's role in this matchup has come to seem perverse. There is a reason why del Potro could so viciously maul Troicki and Berdych, and yet today could not get his claws into any of the seven breakpoints he earned, even against a serveless Federer. The reason was Federer.

The second set was closer, as Federer's standard off the ground dipped, and his first serve continued its merry revels elsewhere. Each game became a discrete, miniature drama. The top seed broke for 3/2, but it felt counter to the run of play. Del Potro blew break points in every other game. Errors began to flow from the Federer forehand, and cries of *Allez!* from his mouth when the big ones went in. He was less assured now, but so was del Potro. Down a break, the third seed's opportunity was stuttering and sliding away. At 3/5 Federer lifted on return, and moved to 15-40: two match points. Del Potro, from nowhere, found his serve, and saved the game. Federer stepped around to serve it out. The score line tells us all we need to know, except that the final game was just like all the others. It was not done easily, but it *was* done well.

Rotterdam is Federer's 71st career title, and his first for 2012. The trophy looks like a decorative hubcap, although it is the Platonic ideal of elegance compared to the usual European indoor efforts. The names of past champions are inscribed around the walls of the Sportpaleis. The cameraperson dutifully picked out '2005 Federer'. '2012 Federer' had been added before the trophy ceremony was complete. Richard Krajicek, the tournament director, proudly pointed this out to the champion on the podium. Federer looked bemused. What do you say to that? To del Potro, he said all the right things, in particular that he hoped to see the Argentine at the World Tour Finals in November. It's a long way away, but based on this week if not this day, the world No.10 is travelling in the right direction. The unspoken assumption was that Federer would be there, too. Some determined or capricious souls sought to paint this as arrogance. But based on this week - based on this career - to pretend otherwise would be to insult our intelligence.

The Wrong Place

I've always maintained that **Nicolas Almagro** is the best clay courter in the world until the better ones turn up. It was an uncontroversial opinion usefully illustrated during last year's Golden Swing, as Almagro conducted a stately procession through Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, winning everything until **David Ferrer** showed up in Acapulco to rain on his compatriot's golden parade. It was also illustrated in Europe a few months

later, when Almagro's abject efforts in the tournaments that matter were punctuated by a title in Nice, which doesn't.

So far this year Almagro has looked like reprising last year's results. He has already defended his title in Brazil, untroubled by the relocation from Bahia to São Paulo. With confidence sloshing over the cup's rim, he turned up in Buenos Aires in fine fettle, only to discover that Ferrer had landed in the Americas a week early. To Almagro, who's gone native, the senior Spaniard is surely about as welcome as Cortés. Protestations that the world No.5 has jumped the gun were summarily dismissed. Ferrer retorted with an icy patrician patience that the reshuffled February tour was at fault. He *always* plays in the fourth week of February - *by God!* - for his schedule is predicated on the eternal shifting of the seasons, and pays scant heed to anything so laughably changeable as the ATP calendar.

It merely crowns the curious theme of the week, which is of players turning up in unexpected places. **Kei Nishikori** is at his best on hardcourt, and his only title came at Delray Beach some years back. Yet he too graces the Copa Claro this week, where he has already seen off **Juan Carlos Ferrero**, who two years ago produced an Almagro-like run through South America. Meanwhile, I note that **Alejandro Falla** is not in Argentina but in Memphis, surely an ideal choice for a game like his, so beautifully tailored to a fast indoor hardcourt. Also absent from Buenos Aires is **Juan Martin del Potro** - he's in Marseilles - although I cannot say if this has ruffled any *plumas* back home. I recall **Stan Wawrinka** copping a hard time a few years ago for playing Valencia over Basel.

Perhaps most surprisingly, **Mardy Fish** is in Marseilles - he's seeded second behind **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga** - making him the only American to skip Memphis, by which I don't just mean American tennis players. Like those events that kick off the US Summer Series, the draw appears to be almost exclusively composed of locals. All four qualifiers are American - **Ginepri, Levine, Kendrick** and **Reynolds** - suggesting that the rest of the qualifying draw was, as well. All three wildcards are, too (**Sock, Querrey** and **Harrison**), and so are the top two seeds. Fish, presumably, had to get away so badly that it trumped his innate aversion to playing away from home. It could be that he is avoiding Falla.

Surveying the weak Memphis draw, especially beside that of Marseilles, and taking into account the 'intimacy' of the venue and the lack of Hawkeye, one has to wonder precisely how it warrants 500 status. Marseilles is merely a 250, and boasts four of the top ten. The top seed in Memphis is John **Isner**, ranked No.13. Whatever is wrong with tennis in the United States - since I'm not American I don't find this topic anything like

as crucial as those pundits who are - one can hardly say they haven't been given every chance.

Speaking of which, I note that both **Grigor Dimitrov** and **Bernard Tomic** contrived to salvage defeat from deep in third set tiebreakers, from **Donald Young** and **Ivan Dodig** respectively. Tomic blew several match points, which is breaking new ground, although Dodig saving them isn't. Sadly, Dimitrov's loss merely continues a trend that had been developing for some time. The Bulgarian has now lost six consecutive tiebreaks, including a couple in his painful capitulation to **Kevin Anderson** last week in San Jose. I submit that the issue may be mental. At this time last year I admonished him for lingering in Europe when there were soft American draws to exploit. It was initially gratifying that he took my advice. This year, in a week when half the guys seem to be playing in the wrong place, I believed that at least Dimitrov's decision to play Memphis was the right one. Shows what I know.

Pinecones in a Brushfire

Marseilles, Second Round

Olivetti d. (2) Fish, 6/3 3/6 6/3

Mardy Fish today lost in the second round of the Open 13 in Marseilles, having survived a bye in the first. He lost to Albano Olivetti. Casual fans will be forgiven for asking 'Who?' Hardcore fans have been asking the same thing. The trusty internet reveals that he is French, a qualifier, ranked No.388, aged 20, and stands at 6' 8". The tournament organisers are probably asking whether Fish's appearance fee – purported to be somewhere north of \$300k – has been justified. It begs the question of whether it would have been worth it even had Fish somehow won the event, assuming he'd received five byes instead of one. It seems a very strange investment indeed for a minor French tournament that had already procured the services of Tsonga and del Potro, not to mention Gasquet and Dolgoplov. Does Fish have a sizeable underground French fan base we know nothing about: *L'Ordre du poisson*?

I cannot remember the last time a top ten player losing to an opponent ranked 380 places lower engendered so little surprise. Fish, afterwards, appeared as accepting, or perhaps disinterested, as everyone else. Cynics might be inclined to read between the lines, and suggest that he did just enough to guarantee his fee. However, the lines were in a song book, and Fish wasn't deviating from the tune as written. He waxed loquacious about his opponent's first serve, which he stridently insisted was the hardest he had ever faced, eclipsing those of Karlovic or Isner. He was predictably keen to add that Olivetti

would not be ranked so low for long – the Frenchman will indeed ascend about 100 spots even if he falls to Llodra in the next round – since no one will concede they went out to a clueless duffer. Instead the American has recast his loss as a tough encounter in which he didn't play his best, and was bested by a rising youngster with the world's greatest serve. No shame in that.

Memphis, Second Round

Rochus d. (WC) Harrison, 6/4 7/5

Fish was the highest seed to tumble anywhere today, but he was far from the only one. Still in Marseilles, Dolgoplov fell to Llodra, while over in Memphis Anderson went down to Querrey. It's hard to call either of those results upsets, since both winners are recent champions who've fallen on hard times. Speaking of which, Nikolay Davydenko was forced to retire against del Potro when he sustained a foot injury in the second set. If history is any guide, del Potro is therefore due to wound his own foot in the coming days.

Meanwhile in Memphis, Ryan Harrison has just lost to Olivier Rochus. Neither man was officially seeded, although I suspect Harrison was in his own mind. A mostly pedestrian affair only came alive in the final games, amidst a flurry of breaks, double faults, scampering rallies, monstered returns, deft volleys and some sumptuous topspin lobs from the Belgian. Rochus let out a sharp bellow on Harrison's final backhand error, momentarily drowning out the tepid applause from the dozen or so onlookers.

Buenos Aires, Second Round

Andreev d. (7) Verdasco, 7/6 6/3

Berlocq d. (3) Simon, 6/2 6/1

Nalbandian d. (5) Monaco, 6/3 6/1

However, it was Buenos Aires that witnessed the most vigorous release of seeds, like a pinecone in a brushfire. I am apparently not allowed to say mean things about Verdasco, because he has tendonitis in his knee, and therefore shouldn't be upbraided for opting to play consecutive clay court tournaments, and thereby lose to a procession of chumps. He'll presumably turn up in Acapulco next week: another masterpiece of scheduling. Today he was hit off the court by Igor Andreev, who, it turns out, has a big forehand. Nonetheless, Verdasco's loss was nowhere near as comprehensive as those of Gilles Simon and Juan Monaco, who collectively managed just seven games against Carlos Berlocq and David Nalbandian respectively. Berlocq was, according to eyewitness

accounts, flawless, while Simon, by his own account, is on holiday. As he has done for a decade, Nalbandian is looking like the best player in the world, and will continue to do so until he doesn't. As ever, his ranking – currently No.85 – bears no relationship to his ability, form or general interest. It was the same when he was ranked in the top ten. I suppose he and Mardy Fish have that in common.

The Nowhere Men

Buenos Aires, Semifinals

(2) Almagro d. (6) Wawrinka, 6/4 3/6 7/5

A good day of tennis will sometimes come at you from nowhere. When it occurs on the final Saturday of a slow week boasting nothing more glamorous than a few disparate 250 events (and a 500 event that shouldn't be), then it can recede just as quickly into the more profound nowhere of lost memory. I suppose one must merely be appreciative as it happens, and to make note of it; a quixotic attempt to quell the surge of general forgetting. Too many of those lists purporting to recap a season's best matches ignore too many of the truly best, just because they happened 'nowhere'. Today was a good day of tennis.

Nicolas Almagro's defeat of Stan Wawrinka in Buenos Aires today probably won't go on to feature on any best-of list, even one compiled tomorrow. This is a shame, for it was a tremendous encounter, and among the more notable clay court matches I've seen in years. I am, admittedly, a sucker for a great one-handed backhand. (Late at night, alone, I'll sometimes even settle for an average one, and dig up some old footage of Sampras or Henman hacking about, the aesthetic equivalent of Hugh Grant cruising the LA streets for ghostly hookers. Like Grant, who had Liz Hurley waiting at home, I sometimes just need a break from marvelling at Gustavo Kuerten. I'm not proud of it. But I digress.) Almagro and Wawrinka have two of the most attractive, secure and effective one-handers in the world. Both can create from the backhand, like a forehand, often achieving angles and touch denied to their double-fisted counterparts. There were entire rallies, especially in that third set, without a forehand being struck. Anachronistic perhaps, but it was also a delight.

Until Almagro broke at the end, it was anyone's match. Wawrinka seemed to have breakpoints in every game. Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that for all Almagro never loses in this part of the season to anyone but Ferrer, he often has recourse to a deciding set. His record is dominant, but he rarely dominates. Often, he isn't far from losing. That he goes on winning anyway - except against Ferrer - suggests greater

mental fortitude that he is usually credited with. Nonetheless, the question of why he cannot reproduce these results in Europe is not merely a nice one, but an essential one. In tomorrow's final, he faces Ferrer.

Marseilles, Semifinals

(4) Del Potro d. (1) Tsonga, 6/4 6/7 6/3

Llodra d. (3) Tipsarevic, 6/4 7/6

If neither of the fine Marseilles semifinals were quite as good as that ripper in Buenos Aires - a 'ball-tearer', as my father would say - collectively they added up to something more. What they added up to was another succinct argument in favour of speeding up more of the hardcourt events. It was a curt rebuttal to the belief that doing so would return the sport to the serve-centric blitzkriegs of the 1990s. None of the four players involved lack a decent serve - Tipsarevic's is a marvel given his size - yet there was no shortage of rallies.

The wonder, however, was that there weren't *only* rallies. There was plenty of serve-volleying, especially from Llodra but also from Tsonga, and streams of aces. Returning also came into its own as an aggressive element of the sport, and not merely as a measure of how effectively the returner could negate the server's inherent advantage. Within the rallies themselves there was ample variation, which buttressed the point that a three-stroke point is quite unlike a ten-stroke one, whereas most rallies beyond a dozen or so groundstrokes will come to feel the same. Variety is the key.

Nonetheless, it probably wasn't the key for del Potro, whose best bet against Tsonga will almost always be to maintain equilibrium while the Frenchman cools and combusts from point to point. At his best del Potro retains control while essaying minor elaborations on a theme of tremendous pace. He can hit players from the court without seeming to take undue risks. His shortcoming is that he cannot go with the best players when they lift to vertiginous heights, as we saw last week in Rotterdam, when he mostly matched a merely good Federer in the second set, but was scrambled by a great one in the first. The Rotterdam final also highlighted a tendency in del Potro's game to start slowly, and thereafter recover. Although fans might prefer it otherwise, as a pattern it is certainly better than the inverse, of fading after a strong opening. At least his recoveries give him something to work with, and are a testament to his underlying commitment and resilience. That was again much in evidence today after he'd lost a match point in the second set tiebreak, but then went on to break Tsonga early in the third, and gallop away with the match.

Tomorrow will be del Potro's second final in as many weeks. He will face the newly shaven Michael Llodra, whose one-handed backhand and virtuosity at the net would mark him as a throwback if his advanced age didn't instead reveal him to be the last of a dying breed. The modern game has driven the Frenchman to doubles, although he still emerges for the odd run at a fast indoor event. Tomorrow's final with thus represent another rarity in the modern game - a true contrast in styles. If del Potro wins - and he likely will - it will be his first indoor title, a rare first in this nostalgic week, the nowhere week of fast indoor courts and one-handed backhands.

Forcibly Disarming

Memphis, Final

Melzer d. (4) Raonic, 7/5 7/6

Isn't the ATP Entry System peculiar? This morning John Isner, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Milos Raonic awoke to the thrilling news that the number representing their ranking had shrunk to be the smallest yet, despite the fact that they all lost on the weekend. Meanwhile David Ferrer and Juan Martin del Potro, who won on the weekend, saw their ranking number either remain unaltered or actually grow larger. I assume casual fans, if they knew or cared, would be baffled by this, although knowing or caring might disqualify them as casual. Lest any are reading, I'll just say that it comes down to a muddled February schedule impacting on a 52 week ranking system, which is something of a cautionary tale for those advocating wholesale changes to the calendar. It'll sort itself out before long, but until then for some players it hasn't been enough simply to replicate last year's results, even if it was impossible to do better.

Raonic, however, *could* have done better, even as he perfectly reproduced his breakout run of 2011 by retaining his San Jose title, and falling in the Memphis final a week later. The abundant, trivial similarities - such as Monfils pulling out of San Jose both times - obscured the degree to which the Canadian has blossomed as a player. Last year's runs felt audacious, unlikely, and, finally, portentous. This year's versions felt imposing and inevitable, although in this he was certainly helped by some generous draws, especially in Memphis. Still, if the Memphis field was weak - and it was frankly anaemic for a 500 - we can hardly begrudge Raonic that. You can only best the opponents that show up, and he did best all but one of them without dropping a set.

Nor should we belittle Jürgen Melzer for being that one (although it's permissible to deride his adidas kit, even if he has mercifully eschewed the matching shorts, unlike Tsonga and Verdasco). Of all the players who entered this disappointing event, the

Austrian was still the only one to win it. In winning it he saw off Isner, Stepanek and Raonic, all of whom are aggressive players in rare form. Faced with this, Melzer is to be commended for remaining assertive himself, although he rarely plays any other way. It's a tough balance to strike, and in Melzer's case he struck it through being particularly belligerent on his returns, by forcibly disarming some of the most potent weapons in the game. I was courtside in the first round of the Australian Open last month, when he emphatically failed to do the same to Ivo Karlovic. He'd seemed beset and impotent that day – especially in the face of a hostile crowd – but in Memphis the spark and assurance had returned. The spark, *and* the footwork, which turned out to be saying a lot once it was revealed he was playing the entire event with a broken toe, an injury he sustained by twisting it in his bed sheets one night, a classic tennis injury.

Today's final commenced predictably enough. Service games trickled by with burbling fluency, inspiring drowsiness and a vague desire to relieve oneself. I did so, and didn't miss much. Neither player looked like breaking, or like being broken. Rallies were rare, although Melzer was clearly better in them. He didn't have the serve, but he had a serve, and everything else he had was better. By 5/5 the tiebreak seemed only slightly more inevitable than it had at 1/1. Then Melzer made a few returns, with the happy result that rallies ensued. Raonic missed some forehands, and was duly broken. It wasn't dramatic. They traded breaks in the second set, but all the games were tighter. This time the tiebreak did arrive, though by now Melzer's overall superiority was sufficiently obvious that the title seemed but a few missed Canadian first serves away. Raonic's first serve, as potent as any in the sport, had not faltered for two weeks. Finally, it did. It still wasn't dramatic.

Elsewhere in the world there were bigger events than Memphis being decided, even if they boasted smaller draws, and leaner rewards. Nevertheless, Melzer's joy upon winning was unrestrained, as he raced to embrace his coach. Somehow, it is only his fourth title, which is startling for a player of his abilities, with his firepower. Throughout a long decade on the tour, Melzer has undoubtedly graced countless tournaments even leaner than Memphis, but somehow he rarely won them. Casual fans, perhaps unaware that a tennis tournament actually took place in Memphis, Tennessee this week, and that an Austrian beat a Canadian in the final, will surely be ecstatic to hear that the victory has halved Melzer's ranking, propelling him from No.38 back into the top twenty.

Solid Gold Trousers

Dubai, First Round

The lowest seed at the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships this year – Juan Martin del Potro – would have been the top seed at the Regions Morgan Keegan Championships in Memphis last week, if only he had shown up. I might be biased, but the Dubai draw seems sturdier, despite the fact that both tournaments are of putatively equal standing. Perhaps you are as unsurprised as I was to learn that Dubai boasts even greater prize money. This helps explain the presence of eight out of the top ten players – only the Spaniards are absent, toiling or gambolling elsewhere – since to a man they have refused any appearance fee *[citation needed]*. Scurrilous rumour has it that each man was gifted a pair of solid gold trousers upon arriving, but this can surely be discounted. Dubai's field is always strong. It's just the honest thrill of competition that draws them, not the money.

This year it is stronger and more thrilling than ever, worthy of the Masters events soon to commence in North America. There were absorbing matches from the very outset, which I found almost as exciting as the fact that I could enjoy them before midnight, which is a rare treat for the Australian tennis fan. A shimmering blue vision before bedtime, punctuating these long arid months of huddled torpor beyond the witching hour – in every sense Dubai is an oasis. It's an effect reinforced by the coverage, which never wastes an opportunity to send a helicopter past yet another 57 star hotel, each a madman's confection soaring into the immense Arabian vault. Clearly, we're not in Tennessee anymore.

(2) Federer d. Llodra, 6/0 7/6

With only a few exceptions, the top eight soared easily beyond the reach of their first round opponents, even quality opponents such as Alex Dolgoplov and Michael Llodra. Llodra's encounter with Roger Federer – who boasts more pairs of golden pants than anyone else – was expected to be competitive given the Frenchman's recent trip to the Marseilles final. However, Llodra fell to del Potro in France, who had in turn fallen to Federer the week before in Rotterdam. Therefore . . .

As a rule – or at least a guideline – I have no time for transitivity when applied to sports. The assumption that since Player A beat Player B, and that Player B beat Player C, therefore Player A will beat Player C is facile in the extreme, and ignores nearly everything that matters. But I can confess to feeling mildly pleased when it works out that way. I suspect we all are when reality confirms the silly myths to which we casually

subscribe. A simpler and more effective formula would have been that Federer beats Llodra, no exceptions, although I was surprised to learn that this was only their second match. Anyway, Federer was far too good in the first set – some of those backhand passes were *vicious* – although it predictably grew tighter in the second. This seems to be the pattern of Federer's matches these days. In his noisily lamented heyday he would start, proceed and end well. He still *starts* well.

(1) Djokovic d. Stebe, 6/4 6/2

It's the exact opposite of how Novak Djokovic shapes his matches, which of course says a lot about both players' approach to the sport. Djokovic gradually gets on top. There was a time when he couldn't stay there for very long, but not now. Now he will ride his opponent into the ground, and he doesn't care how long it takes. Yesterday Cedrik Marcel Stebe kept his feet for longer than I had expected, but eventually he was driven nose-first into the dust. I've only watched Stebe play three times, and I've yet to see him win, but that doesn't mean each loss wasn't enormously promising. For his sake I hope what being promised are victories.

(3) Murray d. Berrer, 6/3 4/6 6/4

Andy Murray beat Michael Berrer. It is only a month since the Australian Open concluded, so he is to be commended. Usually he leaves off winning again until May. He has been adamant that his habitual post-Melbourne sojourn will not be repeated this year. Unfortunately he said that last year. Tennis players, like drunks, are not at their best when permitted to analyse themselves. Knowing this, it seems strange that they're granted daily press conferences in order to do nothing else. Anyway, Murray won, but it was not convincing. He won 29% of points on second serve in the losing second set, against a guy that could barely land a return on break points. That soared to 38% in the third set, a set that saw five breaks. Early in that second set, the English commentators had dared to suggest that, 'like Djokovic yesterday' Murray was now 'getting on top after a tough opening set'. The remainder of the match was a gentle lesson in hubristic comeuppance. Murray was lucky he wasn't playing someone better.

(4) Tsonga d. Baghdatis, 7/6 6/4

I trust I am not alone in sensing a certain melancholy in Marcos Baghdatis these days. He seems to have misplaced his exuberance, his love of the competition. Of course, anyone sharing a court with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga is likely to seem dour in contrast. The Frenchman is mighty in his ebullience. After a tight first set – Baghdatis served for it, hopelessly – Tsonga ran away with the match. Like Djokovic yesterday.

If You Pay Them

Dubai, Quarterfinals

Having laboriously convened the most august congregation of men's tennis players it could afford, the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships was today blessed by the finest assembly of quarterfinalists since . . . well, it's been a while. However, despite fielding the personnel, highly promising first rounds either fizzed or devolved into minor upsets, which bestowed eminently winnable second rounds upon all the seeds. Apart from Mardy Fish, who proved powerless before Mikhail Youzhny's all-court onslaught and all-face beard, each seed duly won through to the final eight. There was no getting around the fact that they would now have to play each other.

All four of today's matches looked enticing, with the stand-outs being Andy Murray facing Tomas Berdych, whom he hadn't beaten in seven years, and Juan Martin del Potro facing Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, which hadn't happened in almost a week. Otherwise, Novak Djokovic took on Janko Tipsarevic, determined to overcome a one-match losing streak, and Youzhny faced Roger Federer for supremacy of the Seniors quarter. (Federer had already seen off Llodra and Feliciano Lopez, two dashing old-timers boasting a combined age of 61, and an aggregate record against the mighty Swiss of 0-12. Not to be outdone, Youzhny's head-to-head coming into today's quarterfinal was an imposing 0-11. Nonetheless, the Russian appeared to be in fearsome form, and there was of course that beard, which is of a lush density sufficient to conceal more WMDs than Iraq, which is to say some.) With the protagonists in place, the stage was set for the kinds of matches around which theatrical metaphors readily abound.

(3) Murray d. (5) Berdych, 6/3 7/5

Sadly, none of the performers had read the script. No match went to a deciding set, and even those that featured a single close set were balanced by a blowout in the other one. We were off to a bad start with Murray and Berdych, who managed to sustain disinterest through almost ninety minutes, right up until the final game, in which Murray wasted half a dozen match points and Berdych desultorily remonstrated with Mohamed Lahyani over a Hawkeye ruling. That these were highlights should tell you all you need to know. Murray often clutched various parts of his leg - another highlight - though never after the points he won, which seemed odd. Afterwards he confessed that it was merely a niggle that in no way impacted on his capacity to play, which is really the ideal when it comes to injuries. It gave the Sky Sports commentators something further to discuss, saving them from having to talk about a player other than Murray. I cannot recall much of what Andrew Castle said, only that he said it at great length. His prolonged sermon

was occasionally punctuated by advertisements for an insurance company, in which he starred.

(2) Federer d. Youzhny, 6/3 6/4

Soon afterwards Federer achieved his 12th straight victory over Youzhny, four of which have occurred in Dubai. As anticipated, the Russian extracted some fearsome weapons from his facial thatch, although none were apparently equipped with a guidance system. There were many wonderful shots, but too few of them found the court. Nevertheless, some of the ones that did were certainly the best of the tournament so far, including a number of audacious passing shots, executed at outrageous pace. One forehand half-volley was slapped with such accomplished disdain that it might be called Federeresque, although Federer, stranded at the net, probably wouldn't call it that. Otherwise the second seed served ably - aided by some woeful second serve returning from his opponent - and was sufficiently accomplished off the ground to earn eleven break points, whereupon he produced his usual effort in securing only two of them.

(1) Djokovic d. (7) Tipsarevic, 6/1 7/6

(8) Del Potro d. (4) Tsonga, 7/6 6/1

Meanwhile Djokovic tweaked his usual practice of building up steam as the match wears on by starting quickly against a wayward Tipsarevic, and never letting up. There was some fight from the latter towards the end of the second set, but by interleaving it with timely errors he guaranteed that late was too late. Djokovic will face Murray in the next round. Andrew Castle went on about it. Federer will face del Potro, who with Tsonga managed to turn the most promising of today's matches into one even more perfunctory than the others. The Argentine looked weary, which is entirely understandable given how much tennis he has played of late. However, as he did last week in Marseilles, del Potro proved that he can see off the Frenchman merely by remaining steady. It helps that his version of steady incorporates one of the biggest forehands in the sport. Having run hot and cold to reach the first set tiebreak, Tsonga thereafter entirely gave up running hot.

What a Difference a Court Makes

Dubai, Semifinals

(4) Murray d. (1) Djokovic, 6/2 7/5

(3) Federer d. (8) del Potro, 7/6 7/6

What a difference a topcoat makes. Every few years, for reasons entirely its own, a tournament will lay down a hardcourt that plays almost the way they used to, back when Pete Sampras and Goran Ivanisevic unleashed first serves so wicked and ferocious they nearly destroyed the sport, apparently. The polarising effect upon viewers can hardly be overstated. There is only one match remaining in Dubai, but everyone suddenly has an opinion. To no one's surprise, these opinions are more or less demarcated according to the play-style of one's favourite players. In tone they cover the entire range from elegiac to disdainful.

We should not too readily discount the degree to which the hurricane slick courts - primarily grass and indoor carpet - eroded the image of men's tennis in the 1990s. Those sections of *A Champion's Mind* in which Pete Sampras sought to justify his duels with Ivanisevic at Wimbledon were the least convincing parts of what was otherwise just a lethally dull book. His insistence that holding one's nerve as the ace-count soared required tremendous skill and concentration entirely missed the point. No one doubted the skill involved, but there are plenty of things that require enormous skill without being interesting, like mastering the French Horn. The 1998 Wimbledon final was monumentally boring, a kind of French Horn recital for the soul.

Nonetheless, if the nineties saw too much first strike tennis, the current era certainly sees too little. The ATP's official edict, diligently adhered to, is that no court should be fast enough that a winner might be struck in the first ten strokes of a rally, unless the player has been certified as recklessly suicidal. The public want rallies, we're told, the longer the better. Anything under ten strokes is barely worth the name.

Dubai's court surface is therefore in direct contravention of this. Andy Murray was today smacking winners past Novak Djokovic at what would normally be termed the start of the rally, but was instead, emphatically, the end. Admittedly Djokovic wasn't doing much right, but he was moving fine. It was a risky approach that yielded tangible rewards for the Scot, and it was to his credit that he didn't abandon it even when it continued working. Think back to that fourth set in Melbourne. On the other hand, Djokovic took to rushing the net. It turns out the court wasn't quite fast enough for that. No court can

help you if you're inclined to dump volleys into the net. It was, of course, the world No.1's first loss of the season.

Roger Federer had rather more success in the forecourt against Juan Martin del Potro. Suddenly, the men's game has arrived at a point where people are serving and volleying. Admittedly, they do both of those things on other surfaces, even on clay, where volleying takes the form of one guy standing at the net waving his racquet about after tracking down a drop shot. The speed of the Dubai surface, however, has enabled these elements to be combined into a single fluid unit. For the sake of convenience, let's call it serve-volleying, at least until the French come up with a catchier moniker. It has also meant that punching through volleys is rewarding - assuming you are among the three or four players who remember how to.

Federer's performance against del Potro was otherwise streaky, but his volleys were uniformly superb, and would have been in any era. In his hands, the volley's function was not merely to end the rally immediately, but to ratchet up pressure. Volleys were strung together expertly. The trick with first strike tennis is not that the rally is over in one stroke. It is that whoever makes the first decisive blow takes control of the point, and then each of the next few shots are extensions of this. Decisive blows are chained into definitive combos, leading to a knockout punch, often at the net. It makes for tremendously exciting exchanges, torrents of errors, and some engaging and fairly misleading highlights packages. There were of course rallies - it was still fundamentally power-baseline tennis, and most points began and ended there - but the longer of these now stood out as desperate tight-rope affairs rather than endless iterations on a single theme. The penultimate point of the match was a 28 stroke masterpiece of baseline assault.

Furthermore, it would be misleading to suggest that it was all about Federer. Del Potro pushed him hard, and squandered four set points to force a decider. That he remained so composed under relentless pressure speaks volumes as to how well the Argentine does the things he does, at how well he moves, anticipates and executes. Some of his forehands were truly fearsome. Had he unleashed them in the nineties, they too might have destroyed the sport.

Dancing Along a Tightrope

Dubai, Final

(2) Federer d. (3) Murray, 7/5 6/4

Roger Federer today won his 72nd title from his 102nd final. The tournament is Dubai, which he has won for the fifth time, meaning he now owns enough of those polished boats that he can technically form one of the largest armadas in Switzerland. At the very least his vast trophy room will need a bigger pond. (As runner-up, Andy Murray was given a ceremonial dagger, which seems either ironic or cruel.) Dubai is Federer's second title of the year, and becomes the seventh event he has won at least five times (counting the old Hamburg Masters and the new Madrid one together). In the six months since the US Open, he has compiled a 33-2 record, and claimed five titles. Federer has now become the kind of player for whom it is simpler and more fun to recount the numbers, since even the deepest well of superlatives has long since run dry.

Today Federer faced Murray for the fifteenth time – the Scot now leads 8-7 – although it was their first encounter since 2010. They used to play about four times a year. They avoided each other last year for precisely the same reason that Murray and Djokovic used not to play much. In an era in which the top four are so dominant, it is difficult for the third and fourth ranked players to meet. So often, too many things have to go right. Today's match only required that Murray inflict upon Djokovic his first loss of the year, and his first at this venue since 2008. With that out of the way, only Federer blocked the Scot's path towards a maiden boat. Alas, for Murray, he could not reproduce yesterday's form, primarily because Federer does not play like Djokovic (especially yesterday's Djokovic). On a fast hardcourt, surfing a towering and unified swell of crowd support, Federer was only ever going to play like Federer.

I feel fairly vindicated in harping on fast court tennis because it probably won't come up again until Cincinnati, in August. The Dubai court allowed Federer to hit through Murray many times tonight, but it was his attacking instinct and vast experience that granted him the wherewithal to stay with it even when his best shots came back. Murray is an outstanding defender, but when your opponent continues to come at you it with immense variety and without discernible relent, it becomes difficult not to crack eventually. Federer's approach forced both men to dance across a tightrope. Rather like Rafter or Sampras' encounters with Agassi, there was no safe option for either player. Murray's detractors – who all too often profess to be his fans – would do well to remember this. Certainly Murray could have attacked more – although on television it is easy to discount just how thoroughly Federer's court position and refusal to yield ground

forces opponents onto their back foot – but even his defence, so often frantically virtuosic, was an option fraught with risk.

Assuming Federer could sustain his level, there was thus the sense that upon winning that tight first set – seemingly against the general run of play – the Swiss would go on with it. Initially, that was how it played out. An early break in the second tinted the match with a familiar hue. It began to look like the US Open of 2008, or, to a lesser extent, the Australian Open final of 2010. Nonetheless, Murray is made of stern stuff, and he broke back for 3/3 by mowing down another Federer drop shot, followed on break point by an audacious combination of topspin lobs. I cannot recall the last time I saw a guy hit two topspin lobs in a row, even Lleyton Hewitt. It was highwire defence, and it was magnificent. The Scot was right to be thrilled.

Alas, for Murray, it didn't last. He was broken again at 4/4, and Federer came around to serve for the match. The second seed grew tight on the ad court and loose on the deuce court. A magnificent rally at 30/30 brought up the first match point, as Federer finally tore into the forecourt and Murray netted an attempted crosscourt pass. Federer then looped a forehand several metres long: Deuce. The second match point arrived courtesy of vintage play, via a series of savage inside out forehands, each more ferocious than the last. The wonder was in the way Federer crept incrementally forward on each shot, until he was inside the baseline, while Murray was compelled first to retreat, and then to guess. Finally, he guessed wrong. Federer sealed the match with another mighty off forehand into the corner, an echo somehow louder than anything else. The crowd erupted and he punched the quivering air.

Whether the echo will reverberate for long is questionable. Dubai is a fine event, and beloved by the players, who each receive a roll of platinum toilet paper just for showing up, but it ultimately means little within the scheme of the tour, especially when the season features few courts this quick. For Murray, it assures us that 2012 will see no post-Melbourne slump. He is well positioned for the year, and has precious few points to defend in the next few months. Speculating on whether he will somehow claim a maiden Slam is as pointless as it is irresistible for Sky Sports commentators, especially based on a 500 event in the Middle East. Nevertheless, I am confident he will do some serious damage, somewhere.

And what of Federer? Confidence is a fine thing, and he said as much afterwards, once the fatally boring trophy ceremony permitted the players to speak. Yet he knows better than anyone that the upcoming Masters events do not reward exuberant first-strike tennis. Indian Wells somewhat offsets the treacly surface with thin desert air, while Key

Biscayne compounds it by taking place in a swamp. The advantage will tilt inexorably back towards the defenders, which means that attack will become riskier, and sturdy defence safer. Federer hasn't won either of those tournaments since 2006 (although before that he won them a lot). Still, until today, he hadn't won Dubai since 2007. Things change.

Luck of the Draw: Indian Wells 2012

The men's singles draw for the Indian Wells Masters has been released, meaning that we may now hunt it for sport. The astounding news is that Federer and Nadal are in the same half. *Again*. That's twice in a row. I don't have a calculator handy, but I'll hazard a guess that the odds on this happening are one in a million. Seems fishy. The corollary is that neither man is in Djokovic's half of the draw, another 'coincidence'. When this many coincidences pile up - that's two, now - it's hard not to conclude that the draw is rigged. The evidence is irrefutable.

Anyway, there are other men in the draw - like a hundred of them or something - and even more in the qualifying draw, which is paring itself down as I write. Entry to the main draw cuts off at No.89, which has forced the indignity of qualification on several men who might otherwise have hoped for a smoother run, such as Frederico Gil and Matthew Ebden. Still, both are progressing nicely. So is Marinko Matosevic, whose first match took place scant moments after he narrowly lost in the final at Delray Beach. From a final in Delray Beach to qualifying on the back lot at Indian Wells . . . talk about a leap in prestige.

The presiding genius of the Indian Wells draw - which decreed for some reason that all 32 seeds should enjoy a first round bye - has determined that a pair of successful qualifiers must face each other in the first round, for the right to face Djokovic in the second round, ostensibly another bye for the top seed. Certainly the ATP is labouring under few illusions. They've already pencilled in Djokovic to face Murray in the semifinals. It is being termed a 'Duel in the Desert', because they're kind of in the desert and there are two of them. Djokovic, apparently, is keen to avenge his loss in Dubai. Woe betide any of the other seeds in his or Murray's path, including Mardy Fish and John Isner, who are fated to meet in the fourth round. Without any evidence whatsoever, I contend that Isner is desperately seeking atonement for last year's Atlanta final, in what later generations will whisperingly dub the 'War in the Wastes'. Tommy Haas and Olivier Rochus are on separate sides of the draw, but will nonetheless meet for a 'Catch-Up in the Player Lounge'.

Which brings me to the inevitable question of who will win the whole thing, meaning it's time to essay a prediction based on nothing more substantial than the fact that I've now seen the names of all the players I knew were turning up anyway, arranged on a piece of paper. To this bland element I can add some entirely unremarkable considerations of recent form. Based only on this year's results, can I declare with any confidence that del Potro will beat Federer, or that Federer will beat Nadal, or that Nadal will beat Djokovic? Experience tells me that the top four will make the semifinals. Those with sophisticated statistical models have arrived at the same conclusion. So have casual pundits who know little about the sport. Given this pervasiveness of weary certainty, it's hard to fathom why anyone would bother to rig a draw.

But wouldn't it be something if, say, Benoit Paire pushed through to the semifinals, and Florian Mayer won the whole thing? Imagine that.

Luck of the Doubles Draw: Indian Wells 2012

Indian Wells is my favourite doubles tournament, because it is the only one that consistently features the best doubles players. This doubtless owes to its position in the schedule, and to a subtle headiness in the Southern Californian air, which encourages languorous pairings, even among burly men. It also offers annual proof that the best doubles players in the world are indistinguishable from the best tennis players in the world, but that these can be distinguished from the highest-ranked doubles players. Consequently, when these players turn up, the shaky concept of seeding becomes worse than useless.

This is not news to the top-ranked doubles players, and I very much doubt whether any of them resent the top singles players showing up, for all that it virtually guarantees a quantifiable drop in their income. Many of the changes to the doubles format in recent years have been aimed at making the format more viewer friendly, and viewers demonstrated long ago that they're most amicable towards the best singles players. The stadium was pumping when Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer faced off in the semifinal last year – I suspect it was the most hyped doubles match of the year – and no one seemed to mind that Stan Wawrinka and Marc Lopez were on the court as well.

Last year nine of the top ten singles players entered the Indian Wells doubles event, with only Andy Roddick missing. Now Roddick has gone missing from the top ten. *Coincidence?* This year Federer isn't playing, which has left Wawrinka desperate and dateless. Having toiled throughout February, Federer is doubtless entitled to conserve his energies, but by not defending his runner-up points from last year he will see his

ranking tumble from No.134 to somewhere outside the top 1,100 in the world. I contend that this is not an accurate reflection of his abilities. Juan Martin del Potro and Janko Tipsarevic aren't playing either.

But everyone else is. As is usually the case, they have paired up with whichever permutation of friend, sibling or countryman is to hand. Andy Murray will naturally play with his brother Jamie. Djokovic has teamed with Troicki, although the singles draw has sadly panned out such that they won't be able to reprise last year's trick, whereby they exited the doubles scant hours after Djokovic crushed his teammate in singles. Nadal, of course, is playing with Marc Lopez, Ferrer with Ramos, Tsonga with Benneteau, Fish with Roddick, and Isner with Querrey. No surprises there. Berdych has teamed up with Kubot. One of them merely sounds like an android, and one of them is.

That being said, some of the teams are strange indeed. I like Nicolas Almagro, who despite his fascinating resemblance to a Spanish Ken Doll engages in weekly struggles that are believably human, courtesy of an infinite fallibility. But I cannot imagine that his pairing this week with the laid-back veteran Mark Knowles came about via any mechanism more glamorous than a desperate grab for partners as the cut-off for registration loomed, like those last horny stragglers as the wedding reception winds down. That's no reason to think they won't win it, however, since last year's titlists Malisse and Dolgoplov pulled the same stunt. They went on to beat the Bryans in the third round, and Federer-Wawrinka in the final. It was Dolgoplov's first tour title. They will be playing together for the first time since Roland Garros.

The big story, I suppose, is that Leander Paes and Radek Stepanek will be teaming up for the first time since their title at the Australian Open, which was arguably the most stirring and moving moment of the season so far. They'll face Ferrer and Ramos first up, which seems entirely manageable. The Bryans, meanwhile, have to contend with Raonic and Anderson, which I suspect might be either unwinnable or unlosable, and that there will be no way of knowing until the end. Both big men are recent titlists, and both boast the kind of serve designed to mock the assumption that experience and teamwork mean more than the capacity to hit the ball extremely hard past your opponent. Still, the twins should find a way, and thus earn a date with Djokovic and friend. Spare some sympathy for Llodra and Zimonjic, who must beat the 2010 champions Nadal and Lopez to get a shot at last year's titlists. The sixth seeds, Fyrstenburg and Matkowski, will face Monfils and Kohlschreiber. Call that one, if you dare.

The doubles specialists insist they love it when the top players play. Finding out whether that is true or not is why Indian Wells is my favourite doubles event. Either way, tennis wins.

The Unwatchables (Part One)

Indian Wells, First Round

To the best of my knowledge, no one is pretending that the decision not to televise the opening rounds of the Indian Wells Masters tournament is motivated by any factor besides money. Regrettably, this is bad news for any writer who covets his self-assigned role as a scourge of hypocrisy. Cynical (or realistic) decisions arrived at with both eyes fixated on revenue can only be attacked for what they are. What they are is cynical (or realistic) and that's that; to go on about it is to inveigh against a system no one ever believed was fair in the first place. For the writer who is merely a scrubbing-brush of idiocy . . . well, he just has to suck it up and wait, although while he does there are still points worth making.

He might point out, for example, that the dearth of early-round coverage hardly helps the lower ranked players, whose already anaemic aspirations might be starved by a lack of exposure. What Indian Wells really does is reinforce the two-tier system that seeding originally created, and that the expanded seeding arrangement later augmented. Seeds already gain a putative advantage through the fact that they don't have to play each other in the early rounds (which is true for every tournament). Indian Wells, with its absurd and extravagant allocation of byes in the first round, ensures that the seeds won't have to play anyone else, either. The television schedule then makes it clear for all the non-seeds who *do* have to play that their necessary toils do not merit a wider audience. Add this to the lingering discontent over prize money and the calendar, and we have an Occupy movement waiting to happen, although 'movement' implies rather greater mobility than most Occupations achieve.

The argument can be made – indeed, it has been made, too often – that such a system only inspires the have-nots to greater toils. The assumption is that the loot enjoyed by the top players acts as an incentive to the journeymen. They just need to get better. But the fact that this argument is mostly heard from the haves, and most vociferously from the self-made ones, should be the clue that there's something wrong with it. What's wrong with it is that not everyone can be a top 16 or 32 player. If every man outside the top fifty improved by a thousand per cent, the number of people inside the top fifty wouldn't change, even as the personnel did. If we are to have a system that ranks

players – and no one is advocating against that – then there should be better mechanisms in place to assist and sustain those players ranked beyond the top 32, whoever they are, and whichever direction they’re headed in.

The most pressing issue is of course prize money, which I’m not going in to right now. It was already thrashed about at length in Melbourne in January, and will continue to be sporadically thrashed as the season wears on. For now I’ll just point out that the Masters 1000 events, as the ATP’s flagship tournaments, are the ideal place to grant the lower-ranked guys a taste of the big time, rather than force them to play a glorified qualifying round in a remote, non-televised paddock. If the top guys don’t have to play seven rounds to win, then why should anyone else, assuming they’ve earned direct entry?

We might point out that more people turned up to watch Roger Federer’s practice session than saw Marinko Matosevic beat Ruben Bemelmans, and that the broadcasters are only showing viewers what they want to see. There is a point here, but it’s disingenuous to suggest that the purpose of media is merely to reflect public desire – Rupert Murdoch’s classic, fatuous justification for tabloid drivel – because it is misleading to imply that what is shown on television doesn’t itself shape what people want to see. Maybe people don’t want to see the early rounds of a Masters event, but if you don’t ever show it, you merely guarantee that they never will.

Furthermore, amongst the legion unwashed and unwatched journeymen, there were plenty of men playing yesterday that would generate ample interest in their respective markets, if only there was a camera running: Haas, Tomic, Davydenko, Llodra, Gulbis. Even those fans who confine their affection to the top players must see this point. Think of how many formative matches of the young Federer were never televised, because he was toiling away in the back lot. Wouldn’t you like to see them now? If nothing else, it’s something to think on, while we consider that Dimitrov, Harrison and Kudla all played well yesterday in posting wins. Surely I am not alone in wishing we could have seen it.

Battle-Hardened and Flak-Happy

Indian Wells, Second Round

There is an old belief, cherished by a certain kind of pundit, that fighting through a three-round qualifying draw transfigures hitherto meek qualifiers into battle-hardened killing machines. It is, at heart, akin to the doctrine that what does not kill us makes us stronger, which was apparently formulated in a universe without maiming. Still, if there is truth to it, then the remaining Indian Wells qualifiers must be very tough indeed, with

souls of adamantium, steely gazes and brains of iron. After all, they've endured not only qualifying, but that 'super qualifying' round that here passes for a first round, in which higher ranked players who'd assumed their direct entry meant much are sharply disabused of the notion. Then, in the quaintly-named second round, our theoretical T-1000 qualifier will encounter his first seed, whereupon he will unleash an unprecedented level of mayhem.

There is an alternative view that qualifiers are compelled to play qualifying for a reason (their ranking), and that in fighting their way through they have grown battle-weary, and that they have only faced similarly-ranked players. Proponents of either view will easily find examples to buttress their claims. Representing the former, Matt Ebden probably felt unlucky in having to qualify at all, and has proven this amply by reaching the third round, seeing off the seeded Julien Benneteau yesterday. Representing the latter view, we have everyone else. The qualifiers may have developed hearts of steel, but all too often when they encounter the big boys, they also have feet of clay.

Juan Martin del Potro saw off Marinko Matosevic today, surviving a tough first set before inflicting a rough second one. Rafael Nadal's February sojourn apparently did him the world of good, enabling him to crush Leonardo Mayer in 75 minutes, whereas he would normally take something like 80. Novak Djokovic was similarly accomplished in seeing off Andrei Golubev, who had survived qualifying, and was, of course, fearsome. These two – Nadal and Djokovic – already have collision course written all over them, which might put them in breach of their clothing sponsorships.

On the subject of threads, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga is still dressed as an explosion. So is Fernando Verdasco, who otherwise looks to be savouring the slow surface and the big heavy balls. Sadly, Feliciano Lopez – who looked classical in his whites and absurdly attractive in his beard – didn't enjoy them so much in losing to Marcos Baghdatis. It'll be something for the Spaniards to discuss next time they catch up for a friendly game of being handsome. Baghdatis, who knocked out Roger Federer here a couple of years ago, proved that you can still wear adidas and not resemble a combusting canary, although there is apparently no getting away from orange.

Speaking of which, green-tinged and virus-ridden Federer somehow found a way past the wildcarded Denis Kudla, a way that mostly required staying in the point until the American selected the appropriate error from his extensive repertoire. Federer periodically grew impatient with this, and would blast winners instead, although the shot of the match was an outrageous drop shot. Federer's biggest issue appeared to be finding enough tissues at each change of ends, in order to staunch whatever was

streaming from his nose. He was lucky it was only streaming from his nose, since he's apparently afflicted by the same virus that has laid many low in the Palm Springs area, and has forced several players to withdraw already, including Kohlschreiber, Monfils, Seppi and Melzer (from doubles). Twitter, which is usually execrable anyway, has lately lit up with lurid chatter of vomiting and diarrhoea.

Andy Murray's hardcore fans live in a near-perpetual state of anxiety, although which particular concern is currently uppermost depends on the part of the season. During the majors, the concern is that he won't win it, which is a kind of acute concentration of the general simmering worry that he'll never win one at all. In the months immediately following the Australian Open, the concern is that he'll slump again, the way he did in 2011 and 2010. Nevertheless, several factors have lately contrived to allay this perennial fear. Firstly, his departure from Melbourne this year occurred in more favourable circumstances, with a loss to Djokovic 7/5 in the fifth, notwithstanding that it occurred a round earlier than usual. Secondly, Ivan Lendl surely won't countenance Murray's usual high-intensity navel-gazing. Thirdly, the Scot played well in Dubai, beating Djokovic. Lastly, he has been making the right noises, including that line that in order to be the best one simply cannot take a month off (unless you're Nadal, apparently, and the month is February). There was every reason to think that 2012 would see no slump at all. Suddenly, gloriously, it was safe to let one's guard down, even for a second.

After his disastrous loss to Guillermo Garcia-Lopez – or GGL as he's affectionately known to those who long ago grew weary of typing his full name – in the second round of Indian Wells last night, hopefully Murray's fans have learned a valuable lesson. Never, ever let your guard down. All confidence is false confidence. Remain vigilant, be alert: be alarmed.

Untoward Scatology

Indian Wells, Third Round

The Indian Wells Masters has been going for almost a week, but it is yet to sustain a theme less incoherent than shit and puke, and the propulsive ejection of either or both from the bodies of various professional tennis players. The big boys have remained, from Larry Ellison's perspective, mercifully untroubled, yet too many of the lower seeds are conspicuous in their absence, unless for whatever reason one happens to be sharing a toilet stall with them, in which case they're merely conspicuous. Davydenko was the latest withdrawal.

Istomin d. (5) Ferrer, 6/4 6/3

(9) Del Potro d. (19) Verdasco, 6/2 7/6

David Ferrer, however, might have been the latest victim. Certainly a debilitating bout of dysentery might explain his crappy performance today against an inspired Denis Istomin. Then again, it's important to remember that Ferrer has never needed a reason for an early exit at this tournament - just an opportunity. Last year he was beaten by Ivo Karlovic, mostly from the baseline. Something about Indian Wells just doesn't sit right with the number two Spaniard.

It's a structural deficiency the number five Spaniard - currently incarnated by Fernando Verdasco - has fashioned into an art form, and one he is happy to reproduce constantly, everywhere. It seems like years since his hairstyle graced even the quarterfinals at a significant event. Today, after a poor opening set against Juan Martin del Potro, Verdasco played exactly as well as he needed to in order to win the second set, minus one point. He reproduced that one point six times in total, each a subtly-wrought variation on the theme of squandered potential, amounting to an extended meditation. Like I said, he's an artist. His signature flourish, the equivalent of the Beethovenian *sforzando*, is the double fault, which he will deploy lavishly or sparingly depending on the occasion. Today he saved his best one for 6-6 in the second set tiebreak, gifting Del Potro his first and only match point.

Nalbandian d. (10) Tipsarevic, 6/3 3/6 6/3

(6) Tsonga d. Stepanek, 6/7 6/3 6/2

Speaking of squandered potential, the match of the day saw David Nalbandian overcome Janko Tipsarevic in three sets. Both men struck the ball beautifully, with exquisite timing. As always when Nalbandian wins, it looked like potential attaining fulfilment. But it never seems to last. He'll next play Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, who eventually overcame Radek Stepanek in a match that was memorable insofar as it was an exceedingly rare example of Stepanek's t-shirt being the least horrible of those on display. Stepanek appeared in a relatively tame blue argyle affair, while Tsonga's t-shirt depicts the last thing lifeguards see when they drown in orangeade.

(3) Federer d. (27) Raonic, 6/7 6/2 6/4

The ostensible match of day, or night, between Roger Federer and Milos Raonic, was a strange kind of affair that never really got going, despite its premium billing as a battle of the generations. It ended up being the kind of tennis that made the dull Indian Wells surface look quick, as Raonic's monster serve and generally inadequate returns initially

combined to produce 12 straight games without a single memorable rally. It was new-school first-strike tennis. The serving dropped away and the returns picked up after that, and to no one's surprise it turned out that Federer was superior once the ball was in general play. But saying that Raonic is worse than Federer off the ground is not to deride him. For the most part he held his ground admirably.

Some have suggested that he paid Federer too much respect, which might explain why he mistakenly opted not to challenge on two close calls late in the third set, on the mere say-so of the chair umpire. Nadal would have challenged, correctly. Del Potro would have challenged, eventually. Nalbandian would have challenged, but would have been denied. Federer would not have challenged, but that's because he's really bad at it. It's fine to respect Federer, but one should never emulate his use of Hawkeye.

Forehand Compliments - A Ramble

Indian Wells, Quarterfinals

(1) Djokovic d. (12) Almagro 6/3 6/4

It's curious where one's mind wanders while watching Novak Djokovic idly construct a routine victory over the twelfth best tennis player in the world, who at this moment is Nicolas Almagro. Mostly it wanders into areas that are neither pertinent to a tennis column, nor necessarily safe for juvenile consumption. But occasionally it strays somewhere almost relevant.

It was last year in the Davis Cup semifinals that Djokovic famously substituted himself for Viktor Troicki, believing that even in his fatigued and wounded state he stood a better chance of beating Juan Martin del Potro in the live fourth rubber. It was a backhanded compliment to his opponent, delivered by way of a forehand insult to his notoriously flaky compatriot: '[We] all felt that I could go out on the court with maybe 50-60% and play better than Viktor at this moment.' The universe wasn't going to let that slide. It turns out that friends in very cosmic places have got Troicki's back. Incensed, they decided to target Djokovic's back, too, whereupon they snapped it. Trailing by a set and break, the world No.1 collapsed (melo)dramatically to the court. Sixty per cent became zero per cent. Surely even Troicki could have topped that.

Discounting that exhibition event in Abu Dhabi - as everyone does - it seems to me that Djokovic has never quite recaptured the immaculate state he sustained through the first nine months of 2011, a period in which he compiled what is surely the greatest start to a season so far, and looked for a while as though he was going to achieve the finest start

possible, which is to say a start without an end. He didn't, and his end was disappointing, marred by three further losses, a withdrawal, and no more titles. This year he has returned to winning, but he hasn't quite looked the same while doing it. (I don't mean to denigrate this, because it really ought to be celebrated.) Some have suggested that the task of repeating last year's efforts is simply too daunting. Perhaps they're right. He seemed to want it enough in Melbourne, although his eventual victory was for me categorically unlike the triumphs of last season, which were often terrifying in their completeness (Rome was perhaps the exception). Yet gods cannot be heroes, and this year's Australian Open was altogether more heroic, through being infinitely more human. Whether one cared for the tennis or not, the struggle was inspiring, because, fundamentally, it was *not* titanic. If he does go on to fashion a season to rival his previous one, it will be, for me, an even more astonishing achievement.

I remarked after last year's Miami final that Djokovic, somewhere, had discovered a mind free from doubt. I remain happy enough with how I said it, although even at the time I knew that as a theory it did not run counter to the general current of thought, which was that Djokovic had always had the game, but just needed to get his head right. This year he seems to have rediscovered his doubt. How many times at the Australian Open did he look like the old theatrical Djokovic, determined that no one in the stadium or at home should fail to note his breathing issues, all while hunching over and flexing his legs almost as frequently as Andy Murray tends to his own niggles, which is to say after every lost point. It was depressingly familiar.

What is unfamiliar was how he has kept on winning, anyway. He still outlasted Nadal in the final, and Murray in the semifinal. He still hasn't lost at Indian Wells. I am coming to suspect that the entrenched notion that Djokovic always had the game, but just needed the belief is flawed, and lazy. The fact that it immediately shifts the discussion into the rarefied, not to say ineffable, discourse of belief should have been the first clue that there might be something awry with it. The particularities of tennis - technique, reaction-time, movement, tactics - are too quickly glossed over in favour of airy theories which cannot be proved or refuted, and invariably rely upon the player's own say-so. But maybe we're all making it too complicated. Perhaps Djokovic is just better at playing tennis than he used to be. Perhaps he's just become that much better at it than the other guys.

At the level at which the top players operate, it can be hard to tell, since the improvements usually come in such vanishingly small increments. So much of the Serb's genius is in his balance and core strength, in his ability to maintain a stable foundation for his strokes even at the uttermost stretch. He's always looked pretty spry to me, yet

I'd say he is moving better than ever. His forehand is undoubtedly better. Ironically, it is one of the more underrated shots in the sport, except when it finds the line on match point down in the US Open semifinal, when we apparently cannot hear enough about it. But this moment is worth examination, since it was so widely lauded as an example of Djokovic's now-impenetrable champion's mentality. However, I remain convinced that the shot was launched with a mordant gallows-recklessness, which is the place Djokovic used to occupy in such situations. In that moment, he was the old, wry, bitter Djokovic, but his forehand was now just a tiny bit better, and so it found the line where once it would have missed. I cannot say whether any of this is true, but it's worth considering. Also worth considering is the extent to which confidence stems from technical mastery, and not the other way around.

Today, faced with Almagro, Djokovic didn't particularly look like last year's inexorable victory-machine. He just looked a better player than his opponent: faster, steadier, and more technically sound. I know it's boring to say so, but that's mostly what tennis matches come down to. The guy who is better at it wins. This brings us back to the question of how good Djokovic actually is. If compelled to guess, I'd say that Djokovic was today operating at considerably more than 60% of his maximum intensity, although how much more I can't say. He certainly would have beaten Troicki.

The Usual Rules of Taste or Sanity

Indian Wells, Quarterfinals

(3) Federer d. (9) del Potro, 6/3 6/2

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

The quarterfinals at the Indian Wells Masters are now complete. The question of whether anything new can be said of Roger Federer defeating Juan Martin del Potro in straight sets has consequently moved on from being vaguely theoretical. It is suddenly pressing. The same goes for David Nalbandian, and of how he can be the best tennis player in the world for almost, but not quite, as long as it takes to win a tennis match. Both questions have suddenly gained greater immediacy.

Federer has now taken eleven consecutive sets from del Potro. Nine of those have occurred this year, across four matches in three months. Stern numbers, which seem downright grim when we consider that Federer has only played five tournaments so far this season. Really, it's amazing they didn't face off in Davis Cup a few weeks ago, for all that Switzerland wasn't hosting Argentina. Last year Federer and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga set

some kind of record by playing eight times in a season. It's still only March, so Federer has a chance to top that. Based on today's performance, I imagine del Potro and his fans can imagine nothing worse.

Indeed, I wonder how for much longer their matches can be hyped as potential epics. The answer, probably, is forever. Hype doesn't follow the usual rules of taste or sanity. In a way, of course, the 2009 US Open final is the culprit. Had del Potro lost that match, then it's hard to imagine everyone would get so excited for his latest set-to with Federer. But he did win, and remains the only man besides Rafael Nadal to have defeated Federer in a major final. Fans have not been slow in declaring that next time they won't get excited at the chance to watch these two play, which I imagine is intended as some kind of threat. (It used to be that blathering idiocy came at us piecemeal, if not daily. Now, thanks to the internet and its surrogates, it is a constant stream.) Of course they'll tune in. We all will.

Much was also made of the Hawkeye issue in the opening game, although it's fair to say that it did have some bearing on the match, since it took del Potro so long to get over. Briefly: Federer served to the deuce court. The ball looked wide, del Potro challenged. Federer clearly expected an overrule, and readied a second serve. Unfortunately, when Mohamed Layhane requested the replay, none was forthcoming. The internet had gone down (not all of it). Layhane - whose shorts have revealed a comely set of pins - was suitably contrite, admitting he hadn't been watching, but that he totally believed del Potro that it had been out. Unfortunately, the rule is that the original call must therefore stand. Ace: game point, Federer. Del Potro was considerably more flabbergasted than he needed to be, argued for longer than he should have, and was thus distracted while the rest of us watched his game temporarily fall apart. Federer broke immediately, and then rode it to the end of the set, Sampras-style.

As he has all week, Federer broke immediately to open the second, although the fact that he hadn't already lost the first was doubtless a pleasant change. He initially looked like riding that one out too, but by now he was well astride the Argentine, and broke again. Both breaks were sealed with majestic forehand winners - the first crosscourt, the second inside out. At 4-1 with Federer serving, the commentator was heard to utter: 'Watch and see if Del Potro makes a charge here.' 65 seconds, three aces, and one volley winner later, and it was 5/1: they say you've never really held serve until you've bludgeoned your opponent with a sack full of doorknobs. Federer tightened slightly upon serving for the match, losing the requisite two match points. Del Potro picked up his game momentarily, but he isn't quite Djokovic yet, and Federer served it out.

That was that.

Nadal and Nalbandian ambled onto court about an hour later, and immediately set about assembling a finely-wrought contest that was if anything closer than the score-line suggests. The components of this potential masterpiece were the Argentine's backhand, simultaneously silken and robust, and Nadal's forehand, which, according to Robbie Koenig, imparts more revolutions onto a tennis ball each minute than any other, ever. I vaguely recall that a professor at Stanford or somewhere proved this scientifically a few years ago. Thankfully some genius has discovered that Hawkeye can track this spin, and churn out entirely useless graphics to illustrate it. Of all the ways in which Hawkeye has enriched our lives, this rivals Channel 7's decibel meter for sheer gratuitousness. A breakdown of Nadal's victory over Alex Dolgoplov yesterday imparted the stunning discovery that he hit no flat shots (that's 0%), but that 74% of them would have rotated over 3,500 times had they remained aloft for a full minute. To put that in layman's terms, Nadal hits with a lot of topspin. Not to sound smug, but I already knew that. Still, Koenig couldn't get enough of it. He must have brought it up three or four times, lavishing upon it the emphatically clipped enthusiasm he usually reserves for phrases like 'considerable aplomb', 'an *oil*-painting of a forehand' and 'more angles than a South African diamond-cuttah!'

A large part of Nadal's problem with Nalbandian is that even he cannot spin the ball out of the Argentine's backhand strike zone. Like Djokovic's, it is simply too good a shot, even above shoulder-height. Nadal has previously conceded that he probably pays Nalbandian's backhand too much respect, but you can see where he's coming from. Nalbandian was handling the spin easily today, at least through the first two sets.

Like so many players, Nalbandian appears to believe he has only one chance at beating Nadal, and when that chance passes, he resigns himself to defeat. Today, that single chance came late in the second set. The first set had been remarkably even until Nalbandian broke brilliantly to end it, with a deft drop shot and a forehand winner. He rode that form through the second set, but could not secure a break. Games continued on serve until 4/5, with Nadal serving. This was precisely the moment when Nalbandian had pounced in the first set, and he looked eager to do so again. They moved to 30-30, and Nadal was two points from exiting. A short, furious exchange ended when the Spaniard pounded a heavy forehand onto the baseline. I could sense Koenig's knowing nod from across the Pacific: a mere 3,400RPM would never have dragged that bastard down. No way. That shot had needed the full 3,500, with change. It turns out topspin has uses beyond kicking balls up over Federer's shoulders.

Nadal held, and Nalbandian, with dull predictability, permitted himself to be broken. At 30-30, where Nadal had previously launched a decisive forehand, Nalbandian opted in turn to flub a pathetic drop shot into the net. For poetic succinctness, only a double fault could top it, and so he served one. There went the set, and the match.

Nadal moved to a 5/2 lead in the third. Fergus Murphy pointlessly issued a time violation, figuring that it was now late enough that he would never need to follow it up with an actual penalty, even as Nadal showed no sign of speeding up. Nalbandian broke, held, and then moved to break points as Nadal served for it a second time. It was terribly exciting. There were break points, but Nadal saved them. The final scrambling point summed up this fine match perfectly – Nadal’s forehand blooming into dominance, and Nalbandian, in the end, not quite making the ground.

It Was an Ace, It Was Victory

Indian Wells, Semifinals

(11) Isner d. (1) Djokovic, 7/6 3/6 7/6

(3) Federer d. (2) Nadal, 6/3 6/4

The worst thing about the constant finals between Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic is not necessarily the length of the matches (which is interminable), or the standard of tennis (which is fine). It is the dreary sense of inevitability, the realisation that no matter how the rest of the narrative plays out, and irrespective of the trials surmounted along the way, the identity of each protagonist is never truly in question. The best part is that those of us destined to write about the final can start doing so even during the quarterfinals. The worst part of having that final *not* take place is that those theoretical paragraphs I may or may not have pre-written may or may not have to be discarded.

It was unlikely to be a problem. Coming in to today’s semifinals, there was little chance that Djokovic or Nadal would lose. Know-it-alls were already thrashing out precisely how the No.2 might ensure that no one beats him eight times in a row. John Isner had been commendable in reaching his second consecutive Masters semifinal, but, realistically, a guy who barely scrapes by a sub-par Gilles Simon is unlikely to trouble the defending champion. Meanwhile, Roger Federer is hardly equipped to overcome a career head-to-head of 9-18 against Nadal, especially outdoors. The specifics of the match-up – Nadal being in Federer’s head even as he kicked heavy balls over his shoulders, an anatomical miracle – no longer even required discussion. They were now simply a given.

Isner's victory over Djokovic can feasibly be paraded as the upset of the year so far, bearing in mind that the world No.1 has not truly lost a match at this level since Paris 2010, and that his only loss at a Grand Slam in the last 18 months was to Federer.² You might contend that Isner beating Federer on clay in Davis Cup in Switzerland was more noteworthy, and you'd have a case. You might also point out that grading upsets is a fairly pointless exercise.

Still, today's result wasn't utterly beyond imagining. Djokovic has not quite seemed himself lately, or, more accurately, he has seemed closer to the erstwhile, fallible version of himself, the one we used to make fun of before he became terrifying. Secondly, Isner has been in good form, and will now enter the top ten even if he loses in the final. He is no chump. Thirdly, the conditions were tricky – gusty, damp, and 12C – and Isner could hit through them, while Djokovic couldn't.

Nonetheless, when Djokovic broke early in the first set, he looked like coasting it out; until Isner broke back, forced a tiebreak, and won it. Djokovic cunningly saved his break for later in the second set, and this time defended it. 2011 taught us that the world No.1 would accelerate beyond the American's titanic reach in the third, but somehow it never happened. There was always that serve to even things up. Isner earned a match point at 5/6, but couldn't convert. Another tiebreak ensued. From that point, his serve kept him level, but courage on his forehand put him ahead. Djokovic toiled under the increasingly fissured certainty that Isner would start missing. Isner didn't, and a 144Mph serve brought up three match points. Sadly for Djokovic, he would only be permitted to serve on two of them (the rules are clear on this). He did what he could, and erased a couple. Isner's fourth match point was the first on his own serve. For the first time today, but not the last, victory was sealed with an ace out wide to the ad court.

Isner was exultant, the unashamedly partisan crowd went off its collective nut and Djokovic fled the court. As if on cue, the sky wept torrents, and there was no more tennis. Commentators returned us to studios, whereupon the result was duly dissected, and its key role in the developing renaissance of American tennis considered. Before long we were treated to replays from yesterday. Hours later, Nadal and Federer appeared, to fierce adulation. Federer received slightly more frenzied applause, although Nadal had Ben Stiller in his box. We'll call it a tie.

² *Djokovic withdrew from Bercy last year, and retired in the Cincinnati final.*

Federer, as ever, commenced with the utmost assertiveness, and swept imperiously through the opening three games. Nadal, as ever, responded, and won the next three. Federer came back again, and won another three, which brought his tally to six. He immediately cashed these in for a set. Throughout, the Swiss deviated only rarely from the sensible tactic of pummelling Nadal's backhand almost without relent. In Melbourne Federer had erred by relenting often – the constant net approaches to Nadal's forehand had been a particular highlight – but today, for a change, he opted not to abandon a winning plan. He carried it through to the second set, and Nadal's backhand began to break irretrievably down, thanks in equal parts to the unrelenting barrage and the unsteady zephyr.

Federer broke twice, and arrived at 5/2. Suddenly, inexplicably, he did relent, and Nadal began to lash the lines, tripling his forehand winner count – it reached three – to retrieve one of the breaks. The Spaniard then held, and dashed for the toilet. The arch suggestion of gamesmanship was aired, seemingly ignoring the inconvenient fact that Nadal managed, heroically, to relieve himself adequately within the allotted span, and return to court in good time. Federer stepped up to serve for it again. A desperate rally at 30-30 ended with Nadal netting a makeable forehand. Match point, and a final twist. The misting drizzle deepened into dull rain, and the players stalked to their seats and zipped up their very stylish Nike jackets. Both had much to consider. Federer: where he would serve. Nadal: where Federer would serve. They returned to court a few minutes later, whereupon we discovered that Federer had been set on a heavy flat one out wide, an homage to Isner. Nadal didn't see it coming. It was an ace. It was victory.

A Flash of Light

Indian Wells, Final

(3) Federer d. (11) Isner, 7/6 6/3

It is difficult to imagine how this weekend could have been more satisfying for Roger Federer, who has for almost a decade masterfully balanced the clichéd necessity of negotiating each point as it comes with the enervating task of pursuing history. Between the ball in his hand and the alps on the horizon, between a moment and a career, there is a gulf of weary space in which to become lost. Somehow, he has never tired, and only very rarely strayed. For fans, endless delectation is found by surveying both the solid mass of the career and the thousands of moments that make it up. For the broader view, the fun comes from simply recounting the numbers, or of tallying up the myriad records he holds (there is a studiously tended Wikipedia page devoted to this alone). For

the latter, unnumbered YouTube highlights clips prove that the greatest career in men's tennis cannot be solid, because it is composed of endless flashes of light.

With all of this to worry about, it's doubtful whether Federer has much time for revenge. Nor, one imagines, does he have the will. If he did, then that urge would also have been amply satisfied in the last two days. Since the US Open, Federer has won 39 matches, and lost only two. Those two came consecutively, to Rafael Nadal at the Australian Open and to John Isner in Davis Cup. Given the gravity of those occasions, they were massive losses, in the literal sense. They should have dragged him down. And yet he proved typically buoyant in Rotterdam the following week, soared to the win, and commenced the streak that has nearly ruined Juan Martin del Potro's year. His two victories this weekend, both in straight sets, have been over Nadal and Isner. I'd like to say you couldn't write it, but the fact is you could, easily. You'd simply be excoriated as a bad writer, since good ones are better at disguising their outrageous coincidences.

Federer's relationship with Nadal, hitherto warm to the point of cloying, has lately gained a frosty edge. His relationship with Isner is nothing like that, even with a painful Davis Cup win to work through. On court with Isner, there's just no time. Both men serve too well. The games that were not love holds were still quick, since the points were all short, and both men hardly dallied between them. Federer managed to hold in under a minute at least once, and Isner must have come close. Despite some initial difficulties, the games soon settled into the metronomic tic-toc of the old school shoot-out. Conditions were glacial – frigid and crawling – yet the play evoked Sampras and Ivanisevic. Two men, duelling with modern ordnance, one with a sniper rifle, the other a Howitzer. Now, as then, one break would prove decisive, if only it could be found.

It almost decided things on Isner's serve at 5/6, when a break for Federer would have granted him the set. Isner erased the break point with another mighty serve, and the scores were tied. Luckily tennis has a mechanism with which to break such ties, and the players seemed content to resort to it. Isner is an exceptional tiebreak player – something to do with his serve, I'd contend – and just yesterday took Novak Djokovic out in a pair of them. Nonetheless, while Djokovic may be the best returner in the world, and among the best ever, I have never known anyone better than Federer at negating monster serves. This first set tiebreak marked the moment at which Federer finally began to read Isner's delivery. All the same, minibreaks were traded regularly, set points arrived, mooched around, departed, came back for food. The last one came as Federer shanked a backhand pass at Isner, leaving the American with a difficult decision: do I put the volley away and make sure of it, or, on this blustery day, do I leave a wobbling, framed mishit and just hope it goes long? It turns out this is a pretty easy decision in

hindsight, or when you're merely a spectator. At the time, in super high-definition real-time, Isner opted to be a spectator, too, and was surely as interested as the rest of us when the ball landed on the line. Federer served out the set.

With the tie duly broken, the games returned to their steady rhythm. The metronome had been dialled up from *scherzando* to *presto*, although for Federer they remained largely *comodo*. The attack came suddenly, at 3/3. The world No.3 had grown progressively more confident returning Isner's first serve. Isner served five of them in this pivotal game and lost four of the points, mostly via Federer's trusty tactic, so far unused, of yanking his opponent forward with a low slice, then carving him up with the pass. The first was a flashing inside-out forehand, the second a backhand knifed up the line. The break came from a backhand at the ribs, fended meekly into the net. Scarlet billows spread, and Federer smelled victory. Another lightning hold sealed the break, and another break sealed the title. Federer thrust his arms aloft.

Isner, afterwards, was less thrilled than he might have been. Where so many have looked pleased just to be there, or merely resigned, the quiet American was disappointed: 'I'm definitely not content.' His discontent was directed at his relative passiveness in today's match, but it was not limited to it. He was also not content merely to have reached his first Masters final. He believes he should be winning these things. It's a daring belief to have, since almost no one outside the top four has won one for almost two years. To win this one he only needed to get through Djokovic and Federer back-to-back. That he believes he could have suggests his self-belief is genuine.

Federer, on the other hand, has claimed the last two Masters tournaments, and tied Nadal's record. Indeed, since the US Open last October the Swiss has won six titles, and amassed more victories and points than anyone else, Djokovic included. Encouragingly, the last two of those titles have come outdoors. This is the first time he has won Indian Wells in six years. Before that he seemed to win it all the time, much as he used to win everything all the time. For those who subscribe to the general discourse of decline, with its cheap sepia-effects and noisome *Weltschmerz*, the temptation to view this as a late-career resurgence, an Indian Wells summer, must be irresistible. But there is a subversive counter-claim that Roger Federer might be better than ever, and that those innumerable flashes of light never dimmed.

The Unwatchables (Part Two)

Miami Masters, First Round

The Miami Masters tournament is underway, although you might not know if it if your engagement with professional men's (and women's) tennis was somehow limited to watching it; if you'd somehow dodged the unusually dull lead-up coverage and the ubiquitous draw-dissections, and had therefore avoided exposure to the most potent soporific known to man (or woman). As was the case at Indian Wells, the initial days at Key Biscayne are not televised.

There is little to say about this that I didn't say last week. Both events continue to outdo each other in strident declarations of their status as the unofficial 'fifth slam'. But the other four slams don't gift all 32 seeds a first round bye, and they provide coverage from the get-go, including qualifying. (So does the Dallas Challenger, for that matter.) There is invariably simmering discontent over this, since it disadvantages the lower ranked players, who would surely appreciate some extra exposure. This year, however, fan frustration has been compounded by the retirement of Fernando Gonzalez, who'd been given a wildcard into Miami for his final tournament. He was then scheduled to play the final night match on day one, meaning that only those present bore witness to the Chilean's last match, which he lost 5/7 6/3 6/7.

Nicholas Mahut was the villain of the night. To the contractually-stipulated reminder that the Frenchman was the guy up the other end when John Isner won the most absurd match ever, commentators may now add the fact that he was last man to survive the game's most menacing forehand. Mahut is a pretty intriguing character in his own right, boasting a niche fan-base all his own, but at this rate he is destined to be remembered as the guy up the other end when big things happened. It can be a tough role to shrug off. Just ask Benjamin Becker.

Apparently, and characteristically, Gonzalez bowed out with class. Reporters embedded in the raucous first night crowd have confirmed that his final match was as exciting as one could have wished for. He saved three match points, and even hugged Carlos Bernardes in lieu of a handshake. There was an on-court presentation, and a tribute video in which most top players wished him well. Immediately afterwards, as the well-wishing tweets swelled to a cacophony, Gonzalez simply announced 'Game Over'. It was hard to top for succinctness. He will be sorely missed, not merely by the other players, but by the same worldwide audience that couldn't watch his final match.

Other doings of note that almost no one saw: Ivo Karlovic beat Lukasz Kubot for the first time in four meetings. There are such things as bad match-ups in tennis, and sometimes they're difficult to fathom. Kubot had never before lost a set to Karlovic, and had beaten him four and two last week in California. Speaking of which, for the second time in two weeks, Kubot lost after serving for the match. Last week it was to Andy Roddick, which can arguably be excused on the grounds of pressure and the vast experience of his opponent. But today . . . Whatever Karlovic's considerable charms off-court, and the fearsome array of serves at his disposal while on it, there are surely no worse returners in the top hundred.

Speaking of match-up issues, Nikolay Davydenko posted his first win over James Blake in *eight* meetings – yet another match that surely everyone wanted to see, especially in this era when fan's veneration for veterans partially drives the sport's popularity. Grigor Dimitrov actually defeated a player he should in Mikhail Kukushkin - and quite handily, too - and will consequently return to the top hundred. Baby steps, I suppose, but the giant leap will surely have to come soon. If his ranking slips further, he may have to qualify for Roland Garros and Wimbledon, mountainous hurdles for a guy who has proved he can stumble over mole-hills.

Bernard Tomic, meanwhile, saw off Sergiy Stakhovsky in straight sets. Tomic's ranking remains in the mid-thirties. His immediate goal should be No.32, and a seeding for the year's second Major. Mention must also be made of Cedrik-Marcel Stebe, who today recorded his first tour-level victory of the year, and his first ever on hardcourt. Stebe - some may recall his tussle with Lleyton Hewitt at the Australian Open this year - provokes interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, his game is fairly attractive in its own right. Secondly, this is a guy who has wrung nearly every possible advantage from the Challenger circuit, including his quite improbable win at the Challenger Championships last year. He can barely win a match at tour level (surprisingly), yet his current ranking of No.91 is one spot above Mahut, who attentive fans may remember was the guy up the other end for Gonzalez' last match.

Forced Perspective

Miami Masters, Second Round

(28) Anderson d. Querrey, 6/3 6/7 6/3

(11) Del Potro d. Karlovic, 7/5 6/4

When Kevin Anderson broke Sam Querrey for a decisive 5/3 lead in the third set of their second round encounter, the American launched his racquet furiously at the court. I didn't see it, since the camera had already cut away to the exultant South African, but the sharp, repeated crack of the Babolat frame against the surface was clearly audible, even over the crowd. Anderson's heroics in gaining the decisive break had been met with a stony silence that was nearly total. The Miami crowd is arguably the most partisan on the tour, and the American wasn't winning.

This is not to imply that this crowd will only support locals. Far from it. To those who complain that the United States doesn't deserve to host three of the nine Masters 1000 events each season, the reasonable response is that in the case of Key Biscayne, hosting is all it does. As far as the loudest parts of the crowd are concerned, the event belongs to Latin America. Yanks who had foolishly assumed otherwise have traditionally been educated with eager rambunctiousness. Recall – or perhaps forget – Roddick's dismal loss as defending champion last year to Pablo Cuevas. Or, more thrillingly, think back to Pete Sampras' potently atmospheric and pulsating victory over Gustavo Kuerten in the final in 2000. Even today, Mardy Fish's win over Frank Dancevic earned warm applause, but the subsequent announcement that Juan Martin del Potro was next up inspired frenzied roars and closely-harmonised soccer chants. As Doug Adler remarked from the commentary booth with unhelpful resignation, 'That's just the way it is.' Robbie Koenig, seated beside Adler, said nothing, having already explained at length why he is permitted to cheer for Anderson. That's just the way it is, and Querrey be damned. Anderson served it out at love, to a dismissive smattering of applause. South Africans clearly rate nowhere in the Miami crowd's affection.

When del Potro did arrive on court, he was met with a vibrant chorus of adulation – the population of Tandil had apparently turned out, and they'd been rehearsing – and faced with Ivo Karlovic in some rather snazzy shades. We viewers were faced with the brain-twisting sight of the Tandil Tower looking dwarfed: more a Buenos Aires Bungalow. Perspective is a strange thing. There is a tendency, when an absurdly tall player takes to the court, for your mind to reject such size, and to compensate by diminishing the opponent, and pretending he is in fact unusually short. Thus Federer, strangely, looked

like a midget against Isner in last weekend's Indian Wells final, even though he didn't play like a one.

It had thus been strange to watch Anderson and Querrey together on court. The former is 6'8" and the latter 6'6", and yet within minutes the visual evidence overwhelmed my brain, such that both men looked completely normal, but for the fact their match was apparently being officiated by gnomes (a particularly cheeky gnome in the case of Mohamed Lahyani). Apart from their powerful serves, their tennis hardly looked like big man tennis, either. Mostly they were content to slug it out from beyond the baseline. This could perhaps be construed as comment on the speed of the Miami hardcourts, notoriously amongst the slowest on tour. But I don't think that's the case. Querrey's game is just fatally short on variety, although like every modern player he can pass well enough when his feet are set. Anderson is considerably more versatile, and this began to tell as the deciding set wore on. He'd had little luck in the forecourt through the early going, but his forays to the net began to yield results as the pressure wound tighter, and Querrey began to pull up on his passes, framing many. This presumptuous frame was duly punished for its impudence, and met its end in the penultimate game. Still, I found Anderson's finish impressive, even if the eerily quiet crowd did not.

I wonder if players ever grow distracted when their accolades are recited over the loudspeaker during the hit-up, and if it is especially off-putting when the details are wrong. Did del Potro notice when the announcer declared that he had won the 2010 US Open (he won it in 2009)? Or is it only fans that are outraged by this, on behalf of their hero? The crowd on hand didn't seem to mind. Most of them were just delighted by the fact that he was Argentinian, and therefore South American, and that they therefore loved him unreservedly. In any case, it didn't put del Potro off, as he navigated a potentially tricky encounter with the potentially tricky Karlovic, without even requiring a tiebreaker. Karlovic, the biggest man of them all, did play big tennis for the most part, smashing down first serves and loping in behind them. Del Potro was compelled to play a lot of passing shots, so he did. The crowd went bananas.

(1) Djokovic d. Baghdatis, 6/4 6/4

Not to be outdone by mere amateurs, Novak Djokovic took up the challenge of nutcase celebrations, after defeating Marcos Baghdatis in a straight sets match that was conducted in good spirits, and which the world No.1 never once looked like losing. His chest-beating antics afterwards were roughly commensurate with those following last year's Rome semifinal, in which Djokovic had battled through exhaustion and saved

match points to defeat Andy Murray in a true epic. Sometimes, I suppose, you're just running on adrenaline. Not tonight, though. It was all very strange.

When Only Gods Remain

Miami Masters, Third Round

Dimitrov d. (7) Berdych, 6/3 2/6 6/4

Unlike last year, when Miami suffered a minor *Götterdämmerung* that saw handfuls of lesser deities cut down in the early going, the divine ranks have this year held together remarkably well. Only three of the top thirty-two – Feliciano Lopez, Marcel Granollers and Juan Ignacio Chela – failed to reach the third round. However, having devoured the last of the mortals, it was inevitable that the gods would turn on each other, and that the greater powers would now feast on the lesser. When only gods remain, the weakest of them are fated to perish.

The exception, in so many ways, is Tomas Berdych. If he's a god, then he is a *deus ex machina*, in the literal sense, although today, conveniently, he fulfilled that role in the dramatic sense as well, providing the plot contrivance whereby the stalled saga of Grigor Dimitrov might be permitted to develop. It hardly needs saying that Dimitrov's story has been in sore need of a kick-start. His biggest win this year came at the Hopman Cup against Mardy Fish, which at the time felt like a big deal. Unfortunately, the Hopman Cup lacks any ATP affiliation, and this performance was therefore of no use to his ranking, which has recently slipped back outside the top hundred. By reaching the fourth round in Miami, Dimitrov will rise to somewhere around No.85. His humanity is evident in his smile and his infinite capacity to err, and for now he remains the only mortal to reach the Miami fourth round.

Today's victory over Berdych is also Dimitrov's first official win over a top ten player. There is a fervent hope among his followers that it is the break-through long anticipated, not to say prophesised. It certainly felt ordained, as though he couldn't actually lose, no matter how many times he double-faulted – nine in all – or fell over, or generally fuffed about. Berdych was having none of it, and went about his assigned task of becoming the Bulgarian's break-through win with what might be termed single-mindedness, if it wasn't so clearly a case of errant code producing a self-defeating feedback loop, a very lousy ghost in the machine. Last week the Czech was bagelled by Nicolas Almagro. It's past time he was recalled to Ostrava for urgent maintenance from his team of Tengineers.

(Incidentally, doesn't *The Tengineers of Ostrava* sound like a light opera from the nineteenth century, by Lehar or, more appropriately, Smetana? Imagine lots of twee ensemble pieces about building the perfect tennis robot. Talk about rich comedic potential. Unfortunately, a visit to Wikipedia has revealed that idyllic Ostrava is an industrial dump, among the most polluted cities in the EU, and that it was dubbed during the communist era, with typical whimsy, 'the steel heart of the republic'. I now envisage a more avant-garde operatic treatment for Berdych, perhaps a constructivist take on *The Golem*. But I digress.)

(2) Nadal d. (25) Stepanek, 6/2 6/2

Speaking of golems, Radek Stepanek was due on court later that day, destined to provide no more than a light snack for Rafael Nadal, who'd barely whetted his appetite on Santiago Giraldo the round before. I'm sure both men were ravenous by the time they arrived in a main stadium from which Ana Ivanovic and Daniela Hantuchova had systematically drained all energy, via a match conducted at spectacularly low intensity. I've already remarked that the Miami crowd won't rouse itself for anyone that isn't from Latin America or the United States (Nadal and Federer excepted), but you'd think at least the men might extract something from a match between two renowned beauties who'd taken the time to coordinate their outfits perfectly. Alas, no. As the second set tiebreak ground down to match point, the crowd began gradually to rouse itself, their fitful yawns combining with the frantic gurgles of those sleep apnoea sufferers still trapped in slumber. The lucky few that woke in time saw Ivanovic seal the match with a mighty forehand winner, and might have felt a moment's regret at the match they had just slept through. I'm happy to put their minds at ease, and reassure them that they hadn't missed anything. The seventeen points before that were *all* decided by unforced errors. I only wish I was exaggerating.

Radek Stepanek was the oldest man remaining in the Miami draw, which is saying something, given the weary antiquity of the current top fifty. I would say he was evergreen, if he didn't so closely resemble an old tree-root. Still, he's very fit and a dangerous prospect for many. The immense variety in his game means that Stepanek has a number of decisions to make when facing Nadal. Should he hang back and attempt to rally with the world No.2, and therefore lose fairly quickly? Or does he rush the net, get passed constantly, and lose very quickly? Decisions, decisions . . .

Through the first five games, he opted to trade ground-strokes, often successfully, and generally to the Nadal backhand, which was patchy. Every shot into the open court was followed in. This pattern lasted for almost five games, until Stepanek fought to break

point on Nadal's serve. The Czech built his attack thoughtfully, and worked his way forward with a scathing combination of strokes, ending with a backhand up the line. Nadal sprinted to his right, and nailed the backhand pass up the line. From there, it didn't matter much what Stepanek did. Nadal took firm control of a match that had really been so unlosable that even he could probably admit it, if questioned under duress. The Spaniard won the next seven games, and the last couple. Some of his passing shots, especially on the forehand and especially on the run, were magnificent.

I am consistently amazed at Nadal's accuracy when catching the ball off-centre. Slow motion replays attest to it. The Babolat AeroPro Drive GT is admittedly generous in this respect – I use this frame myself, and the sweet-spot is immense – but it is still remarkable, especially given the work he puts on the ball. (Regrettably Robbie Koenig was not on hand to talk us through the RPM graphics that flashed up on screen.) The most prodigious shot of the match was a darting forehand pass, struck at the full stretch, which he curled off the outer part of the strings that curved up and over and in. I doubt it would have been possible if he tried for the centre. The crowd loved it. Stepanek, hopefully, learned a valuable lesson: if you approach to the Nadal forehand, and you're certain it'll be a clean winner, you're *wrong*.

Kiss Cam strove but sadly failed to add much to proceedings. It didn't help that through the early rounds Miami has lacked the star power of Indian Wells, which was always going to be the case since famous people notoriously prefer deserts to swamps (I think David Attenborough covered this in an episode of *Life*). I only bring this up because of an incident back in California, in which Kiss Cam allowed Ben Stiller to prove the theory that celebrities are better than normal people. As his face was framed on the Jumbotron he lunged without hesitation past his wife and kissed the lady next to her. He has kind of ruined it for everyone else.

A Sudden, Fey Glint

Miami Masters, Third Round

(31) Roddick d. (3) Federer, 7/6 1/6 6/4

Roger Federer was tonight defeated by Andy Roddick in a strange encounter that balanced a first set in which the Swiss could hardly have played worse with a deciding set in which the American has rarely played better. The second set, in which Federer looked set to tear the match away from Roddick as he has so often before, defied expectations that it would prove pivotal, except insofar as it lulled the world No.3 into a

fatal over-confidence. In the end he was punished for it by a veteran who played like he had nothing to lose, even when everything was on the line.

To be fair, Federer was quite justified in entering the match that way, for all that he would insist, if asked, that he never under-estimates any opponent. A head-to-head of 21-2, the most lopsided in the sport, suggests that his estimation of Roddick has been more or less spot-on. And he was hardly alone. The main fan interest surrounding this match had been whether Roddick would indeed become the first man to achieve a 20 match deficit in a head-to-head. Most people were already looking farther ahead, to the semifinals. Numbers had been crunched in order to discover how soon Federer might replace Nadal in the No.2 spot.

The first set was an ugly affair, its hideousness made explicit by the numbers. Roddick was steady, and struck no winners off the ground. Federer was erratic, and found 17 unforced errors. Of course, both served well. The tiebreaker barely lifted, and was decided when Federer failed to put away an overhead, and lollied it back down the middle of the court. Roddick pounced, and tore the forehand pass across court. In many ways, this single point prefigured the final set - Federer playing too safe, and Roddick ripping his forehand.

The second set, but contrast, was clean and quick. Federer wrapped it up with three breaks in under half an hour, without doing anything particularly outstanding, merely playing within himself the way he generally does when facing Roddick. Roddick began to drift further behind the baseline, leaving himself open for the drop shot. Knowing looks were exchanged in the stadium and in cyberspace. The commentators referred to their crib sheets, and astutely remarked that Federer uses the drop shot a lot more these days, whereas he used to disdain it. They started pointing this out about four years ago, and there's no reason to think they'll stop any time soon. The statistic that Federer has come back to beat Roddick four times after losing the first set was also duly paraded. Federer's fans, momentarily breathless at the hitherto unconsidered idea that Roddick could actually win, began to breathe easier. When Federer opened the deciding set with an easy hold, and then moved to 0-40 on the Roddick serve, easy breaths gave way to sniffs of victory.

But Roddick, who'd been steady in the opener and outclassed in the second, still had his serve. He saved four break points in that game. This astounding turn of events tore apart the space-time continuum, which was already threadbare after a couple of successful Federer challenges earlier on, since reality cannot withstand that kind of treatment. Suddenly Roddick was eight years younger; the brash world No.2 who'd

blithely outlined his game plan for besting Federer in their first Wimbledon final: 'I'm gonna belt the crap out of the ball.' Off balance, he ripped a 92Mph forehand winner up the line: 0-15. Roddick was suddenly up near the baseline, and eager to press.

Federer seemed unfazed, and oblivious to his peril, even though the sudden, fey glint behind Roddick's eyes was hard to miss. Federer lost the next two points on suicidal approaches at the Roddick forehand, a shot that long experience has taught Federer not to fear. The American was hollering with guttural panache on each of them, a calibre of vehemence he usually reserves for Fergus Murphy. The crowd, who had initially greeted Federer with greater approbation, was now going nuts for their compatriot. There was a pronounced quality of stubborn brinkmanship in those two approaches in that game; neither was struck with adequate pace or depth, as though each dared Roddick to do it again. From nowhere, Roddick was at triple break point. Federer played a strong rally on the first, and moved to the net. But again, he played within himself, and did not stick the volley into the open court. Roddick sprinted to his right, and again hammered the forehand pass. From 0-40 down in the previous game, Roddick was now up the break. He had not hit his forehand like this in almost a decade.

From there it was tight. Federer went back to holding comfortably (the second game of the third set is the only service game in the entire match in which he struggled), although his percentages began to drop. He ended with 50% first serves in the third set, although it hardly mattered, since the damage had been done. Roddick's, on the other hand, only rose, which mattered a great deal, and he first served his way to a famous and courageous victory.

Both men were gracious afterwards. Federer insisted that it hadn't felt like he was playing the world No.30, but a former champion and world No.1. It is Federer's first best-of-three loss since Cincinnati last August (to Berdych), and the first time he has lost to a player outside the top 20 since Halle in 2010 (to Hewitt). What was most disappointing, from my point of view, is that his innate aggression, lately rediscovered and much in abundance, was hardly in evidence. Throughout the entire match Federer appeared determined merely to do enough to win. It was understandable, and presumably no one knows better how to beat Roddick. Except this time he didn't.

In Roddick, on the other hand, we witnessed a former top player playing the way everyone has been insisting he should for years. Particularly impressive was the way he reversed the trend of the second set, which was to retreat and hope Federer continued to miss. Big serving and big forehands are what got him to the top of the sport. As his career winds down, there are more and more things that will stop working the way they

used to. But tonight he proved that the weapons that enabled his rise a decade ago are still there, if only he has the courage to use them.

The Tipsarevic

Miami Masters, Quarterfinals

(4) Murray d. (9) Tipsarevic, 4/6 6/3 6/4

'Murray has now won eleven of twelve points on The Tipsarevic's second serve,' declared Barry Cowan in the Sky Sports commentary. I'm not sure precisely when 'Tipsarevic' became 'The Tipsarevic', thereby transforming from a surname into a title, like the Dalai Lama or the Lord of the Dance. Perhaps it has always been thus, and something had been lost in the translation from Serbian. Either way, Janko, the current incarnation of The Tipsarevic, was having a bugger of a time defending his second serve in the deciding set.

Not unlike the Dalai Lama and Michael Flatley, Janko also has a gift for aphoristic concision roughly equal to Alfred Polgar's, as reaffirmed in an interview that appeared on Tennis.com yesterday: 'I am [...] trying to make my life in a way that 2 and 2 and 2 and 2 adds up to eight. I am not trying to divide or multiply anything.' If it came from my six year old daughter I doubt anyone would be very impressed, but few expect professional athletes to be so adept at basic arithmetic, nor to draw so subtle a parallel to their own lives: *Oh, it's a metaphor!*

The same concision cannot be ascribed to Peter Fleming, who commemorated a missed volley from Andy Murray by remarking that 'it merely confirms the axiom that the point is not over until the ball has bounced twice . . . or has bounced outside the court, I suppose'. Since he'd already abandoned sonority for accuracy, he probably should have mentioned some of the other ways a point can end. It'd be a hell of an axiom, as breezily epigrammatic as the ITF's *Rules of Tennis*.

By the time any of this occurred, early in the third set, the match had settled into a predictable rut. Ceding to The Tipsarevic's preference in such matters, we may express the mathematical equation as: slow Miami surface + superior defensive opponent = inevitable loss. Last year he went out to Gilles Simon, who is basically a smaller, less powerful and less creative version of Murray. In the game in question, which was the fifth of the third set, a couple of errors from the Serb eventually saw Murray break. Forgetting his own credo, Tipsarevic set about multiplying these mistakes, which allowed the Scot to coast through to the set and the match. Tipsarevic would eventually amass a

mighty 51 unforced errors. Many of these came at the end of lengthy, enterprising rallies, and thus weren't unreasonable even if unforced. But these are the kinds of rallies that Murray is almost always going to win, and without red-lining his game there was little Tipsarevic could do about it. His choice, once Murray got his act together, was between a reckless error immediately or a desperate one eventually.

Through the early going, however, the strange thing had been that Murray had not been winning all that many of these extended points. The Scot's foot speed is such that even playing badly he won't concede many winners on a court like Miami, which means that an off-day will generally express itself in errors. Last year's notorious loss to Alex Bogomolov Jr at this venue was a squalid testament to this, as he tracked down everything, and then launched everything into the net. Today, he was broken in the opening game, but broke straight back. He broke again, and led 4/1. From there he dropped serve twice, and lost the set. Constant breaking of serve can be exciting, but today proved that it doesn't have to be, as the women have been proving all week. Murray was listless, irritated, and clearly discomfited, which was initially easy to miss, since he wasn't ostentatiously clutching at his leg, which is his usual shorthand signal for any ailment whatsoever. He fell behind an early break in the second set, broke back, and was broken again, whereupon he hollered for a medic.

Court-side microphones revealed that he couldn't keep any fluids down, since there was too much air in his gut. The doctor worked his magic, which I think consisted of an antacid tablet and a kind word. The magic lay in the miraculous speed with which the tablet took hold. Almost immediately, Murray's form picked up. He didn't start playing like Djokovic, it's true. But he did start playing like Murray, which enabled him to steady and remain in rallies long enough for The Tipsarevic to commence multiplying his errors. By the end Murray was playing exactly like himself. He next faces the winner of Rafael Nadal and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga.

As for Tipsarevic, he was due back on court in an hour, so that he and The Kubot might face Max 'The Beast' Mirnyi and Daniel 'The Canadian Doubles Veteran' Nestor.

Drama or Quality

Miami Masters, Quarterfinals

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

My stated intention to write about last night's Miami quarterfinal between Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Rafael Nadal was, as the second set wore tediously down, coming up hard

against my urge to stop watching it entirely. The tennis - and this is intended as wry British understatement - was not great. By Nadal's own admission afterwards, Tsonga was all over the place, and all the Spaniard required to win was an amiable defence. Still, the standard can be low and yet a match can still prove worthwhile, provided there is sufficient drama. Alas, until Nadal stepped up to serve for the match at 5/4, it wasn't dramatic, either.

Of course, we know what happened next, how Nadal tightened, Tsonga broke back, lifted, and broke again to force a decider. The Frenchman appeared willing to go on with it, despite a recalcitrant first serve, an unwavering commitment to piss-weak drop shots, and an unhelpful preoccupation with the line-calling. Nadal, of course, fought on grimly, battling through his own service woes, and a knee injury apparently so grievous he almost couldn't run at top speed. The quality still wasn't very high, but at least it was now exciting. It became especially so when at 4/4 Tsonga sent his second-serve in search of the first, whereupon it went missing, too. He was broken.

For the second time, Nadal served for the match. Match points came and went, forehands went in and out, Tsonga had some break points, and a broken string. Then it was over. Having failed to snatch victory from the jaws of victory, Nadal was forced to venture into victory's maw, inch his way down its gullet, and retrieve a win that was half-dissolved in gastric juices. It was still recognisably a win, and he took it. On the subject of gastric juices, in some ways this match was a mirror of the day's first quarterfinal, in which early intestinal turbulence gave way to serene sailing for the favourite. All else being equal, I suppose you'd take the later match for entertainment: if the tennis itself is going to underwhelm, there may as well be a decent dramatic arc, with the climax at the end.

(21) Monaco d. (8) Fish, 6/1 6/3

The fervent hope, heading into the second day of men's quarterfinals, was that the drama might be sustained, and conducted at a higher level. Miami has so far been short on great matches, and we were due. Speaking of being due, Mardy Fish has complained this week that despite his status as the top-ranked American he had yet to play on the main stadiums at either Indian Wells or Miami. He has a point. Today he was granted his wish, and a timely tutorial in being careful of what you wish for. He also discovered that the stadium court at Crandon Park is brim-full of Argentinean fans. This became urgently relevant when it turned out his opponent was Argentinean, too, and had already thrashed an American - Andy Roddick - on this court just days earlier.

Juan Monaco has now thrashed *two* Americans on the stadium court. Unlike Roddick, Fish wasn't bagelled – I am striving manfully to eschew food metaphors, as so many others haven't – although he did win one less game. The debate as to which American sustained the greater hiding is a pointless one. Both were thoroughly outclassed by Monaco. Both men lost handfuls of games in a row, which is troublesome against a player who doesn't rely on momentum. Monaco is not the type to get on a roll, and ascend to unplayable heights. What he does do is prove that there are varying shades of 'solid', and that within the narrow parameters of toughness and determination, there is room for a kind of virtuosity, which extends beyond mere doggedness, and attains an inexorable mercilessness. Fish probably believed he could have beaten Monaco if he'd played his best, but must have known early on that he wasn't playing his best, and stood little chance. Every mistake was dealt with.

Monaco now moves through to his second hardcourt Masters semifinal. As he did in Shanghai in 2010, he has undeniably benefited from an unexpectedly open quarter, in this case due to Roddick's defeat of Federer. (In Shanghai he took full advantage when Melzer removed Nadal from his path.) Even if he progresses no further, he will return to the top twenty for the first time since 2008, landing somewhere around No.16, with the clay season to come.

(1) Djokovic d. (5) Ferrer, 6/2 7/6

It is doubtful whether Monaco will progress much farther, since he must face Novak Djokovic in the semifinals, who tonight slugged and flowed past David Ferrer in the best match of the round. Here, finally, was tennis played at a truly elite level. Ferrer had astonished the round before in seeing off Juan Martin del Potro, and sustained that form into the first set against the world No.1, in which, frankly, he was lucky to get a game. This was the planet's fifth best player performing to his abilities, but it didn't matter. From the third point on, in which he darted up to a drop shot and flicked it cross court for a winner, Djokovic was nearly flawless, and without any discernible weakness.

Having served out the first set, Djokovic broke to open the second. It was hard to see what Ferrer could do about it, other than play even better than he can. It thus proved both laudable and hugely entertaining when he did just that, breaking Djokovic back in a spectacular second game that lasted nearly a quarter of an hour. Then it got tough, with both men trading savagely fought holds for a while, until Ferrer was broken again at 4/4. Djokovic came around to serve for the match, and was broken back in turn, courtesy of a daring forehand-volley-overhead combination from the Spaniard. For the first time in days, we had quality *and* drama.

Sadly the final tiebreaker proved perfunctory. Ferrer is a notoriously poor tiebreak player, considering his ranking, although not considering his serve, while Djokovic ranked among the best in history even before his 2011 season. Nonetheless, despite a flaccid conclusion, it was the finest match of the tournament so far. The hope is that it earns Ferrer more fans, since he deserves them. As for Djokovic, the first set alone should be sufficient to convince us that he has, for the first time in 2012, returned to somewhere near his level of last season.

Terrifying.

Too Much Luck

Miami Masters, Final

(1) Djokovic d. (4) Murray, 6/1 7/6

Andy Murray reached the Miami Masters final with only three wins, usefully augmented by a pair of walkovers and a bye. To that diverse collection of results Novak Djokovic has now added a loss. The chatter coming into the match had been whether a lack of match play might prove fatal for Murray. If nothing else it was a handy pre-emptive excuse – a ‘precuse’. After he did in fact lose, the consensus was that the ease of his passage hadn’t helped. It turns out the ideal preparation for facing the world’s best player is not a bilious set-to with Janko Tipsarevic, followed by a non-start against Rafael Nadal. Back to the drawing board, I suppose.

Djokovic’s last two rounds, however, represent a timely lesson in how little can be gleaned about tennis matches merely by perusing the scores, which is bad news for those almost forgotten encounters from which only the numbers survive. Djokovic’s quarterfinal against David Ferrer (6/2 7/6) and semifinal against Juan Monaco (6/0 7/6) boasted similar scorelines, and even unfolded in much the same way. Both matches were sustained slug-fests in which the world No.1 produced an opening set that was functionally close to perfect, before fading in the second, precisely as his opponent lifted. In both matches Djokovic eventually broke, and served for the match. Both times he was broken back whilst doing so, and yet won the ensuing tiebreak without discernible issue. In spite of these manifold similarities, the quarterfinal had been the match of the tournament, while the semifinal was barely the match of the day, even when the day’s other match was cancelled.

Today’s final looked like reprising these contours, as Djokovic stormed to a 6/1 opening set. Graphics kept appearing detailing each man’s success in rallies over 10 strokes in

length. (There appeared to be no way for viewers to stop them.) Thus enthralled, we discovered that, by the set's conclusion, both Murray and Djokovic were about equal in this statistic, without, of course, being told why. This fine point was left to the commentators, who as ever proved unequal to the task. 'Murray is doing very well on the longer rallies,' the disembodied Sky Sports voices remarked, 'This bodes well for the Scot.' What they failed to mention was that Djokovic had been aiming for and missing the lines in the early going, especially on his forehand, and that Murray's backhand was leaking errors so steadily that most rallies ended prematurely. Over on the Tennis TV feed, Robbie Koenig maintained a sullen silence in protest that his beloved new RPM graphics weren't being shown. Rally length is all well and good, but how fast is the ball *spinning*?

Backhand aside, Murray wasn't playing poorly. But you don't have to play very badly to go down 6/1 to Djokovic. The Sky coverage cut back to the studio, and to the avowedly expert opinions of Greg Rusedski and Barry Cowan, both of whom fell short of non-partisanship. 'So what does Murray need to do?' asked the host, Marcus Buckland. Rusedski responded at almost impossible length that 'For Murray this match is all about the second set.' It was a hard contention to argue with insofar as this was the set they were scheduled to play next, having just now concluded the first. Would it still be about the second set if they went to a third? But did Rusedski mean that it had *always* been about the second set, and that Murray had come into this final willing to spot the world No.1 and defending champion a head start? Did he assume based on his last two matches that Djokovic would lose focus in the second set? It seemed like a tenuous thread from which to suspend a strategy.

Somehow, though, Rusedski was almost right, the way all broken Canadians are at least twice per day. Within the narrow parameters that Djokovic established in the last two rounds, it turns out that infinite variety is possible. The Serb's level dipped, and the Scot's rose. Murray's game point conversion rate remained horrendous, yet somehow he was holding. He even earned a break point, but looked nonplussed and gave it back. At 6/5 he came within two points of the set. Djokovic served an ace up the T, which Murray took personally. The clock ticked past two hours. The tiebreak hove into view, gradually and painfully, like an obese elephant seal cresting a sand dune. Somehow it arrived *without* Djokovic failing to serve for the match. Finally, the match looked like breaking new ground. There were no rules. Anything might happen. I felt giddy.

What did happen is that Murray maintained his commitment to flaccid groundstroke errors, and that he followed up one of the greatest drop shots I've ever seen with a double fault. It was typical of a day when he produced many terrific points, but almost

never consecutively. Djokovic, it must be said, was hardly any better. But he *was* slightly better, and better enough in every meaningful aspect of the sport. Stats generally tell us little that isn't obvious from watching the actual match, and having actually watched it, I concur that a combined count of 77 unforced errors and 35 winners feels about right. Of those errors, Murray struck 39, of which over half were from the backhand, ostensibly among the game's finest. The last one came from the forehand, however, drifting long. Djokovic watched it land, and raised his arms in restrained triumph.

For Murray, losing a fairly dull Miami final is a spectacular improvement over last year, when he lost to Alex Bogomolov, or even last week, when he lost to Garcia-Lopez. Sometimes you just need a little luck, and your fortunes are reversed. Having Milos Raonic and Nadal cleared from your path is more than a little luck, though. The belief that it was too much luck is not confined to the Sky Sports studio.

For Djokovic, Miami 2012 is his 11th Masters title, which ties him for fourth on the all-time list, equal with Pete Sampras, and behind only Federer and Nadal (19 each), and Agassi (17). There is a pervasive feeling that Djokovic has not matched last year's form in 2012. It's true that he is no longer winning literally everything, and his godlike level now lasts a set instead of, say, eight months. But despite that, he is still winning. Miami is an event of some significance – I recall Sampras referring to it as the fifth major after winning in 2000, long before that phantom accolade devolved into a marketing gimmick – and for Djokovic to have won it with so little difficulty tells us everything we need to know. It tells us that he remains the best player in the world.

Hardcourt Retrospective 2012

The ATP calendar has never made a great deal of sense, which is no great issue, since nowhere is it written that sporting schedules need to be sensible. In the case of tennis, a global concern with a vast delta of revenue streams, it mainly has to be consistent. While there are certainly issues with the current 52 week entry system, it more or less flows smoothly based on the fact that the same tournaments are mostly played at the same time each year. Olympic years, in which an additional premier event is plonked down midstream in September, thus always throw the calendar out of whack. Lesser tournaments are pushed to the banks, and the lower ranked players, for whom merely staying afloat is an admirable goal, bob and submerge fitfully.

This year, the Davis Cup quarterfinals have been hauled forward from their accustomed position after Wimbledon (when broad public interest in tennis has begun precipitously to wane), to the week after Miami (when it has barely started to wax). Those players

whose nationalistic fervour demands immediate expression have already scattered to the various ties across the globe. Others, their patriotism on a slower burn, are holding out for the Olympics, and have retreated in the meantime to their pleasure barges. Davis Cup weeks always dam the season's lurching flow, though in this case it has yielded a valuable moment to regroup, before the annual invasion of Southern Europe begins anew, launching from its traditional staging points in North Africa and, um, Houston.

With space in which to do so, it seems appropriate to look back on the hardcourt season that has just concluded, which began in Atlanta last July, and concluded in Miami a few days ago. This period incorporates the US Summer, the Asian swing, the European indoors, Australia, and the disparate events in February that culminate in the US Spring Masters, and therefore includes two majors, six Masters 1000, the World Tour Finals, and a multitude of 250 and 500 events. As I've said before, it's a worthwhile way to look at the season, as a hardcourt marathon interrupted by those too-brief months on the dirt and turf of Europe. A longer perspective is always a useful thing to maintain.

Hardcourt Rankings

This list ranks players by their accumulated points across the hardcourt season.³ Their actual current ranking is in brackets.

1. (1) Novak Djokovic – 7,700
2. (3) Roger Federer – 6,845
3. (4) Andy Murray – 5,540
4. (2) Rafael Nadal – 3,990
5. (6) Jo-Wilfried Tsonga – 3,780
6. (7) Tomas Berdych – 2,995
7. (5) David Ferrer – 2,645
8. (8) Janko Tipsarevic – 2,550
9. (11) John Isner – 2,270
10. (9) Mardy Fish – 2,135

That **Novak Djokovic's** hardcourt ranking matches his overall ranking suggests that his exemplary hardcourt performances were matched by brilliance on the natural surfaces, yet another example of a statistic miraculously revealing information we already knew. His accumulated point haul includes victories at the US Open and Australian Open, as well as Masters titles in Montreal and Miami. Owing to exhaustion and injury, his results fell away after the US Open, and so far he has not quite reproduced last year's post-

³ These figures do not include Davis Cup matches played on hardcourt.

Melbourne level, although he isn't far shy. In all Djokovic claimed four titles, and achieved an overall match record of 42-6 (.875).

Roger Federer's hardcourt ranking is higher than his overall ranking, which is hardly surprising when we consider that his hardcourt points account for about 76% of his total points. This reflects lustreless results on clay and grass - the French Open being the brightest spot - mixed with blinding hardcourt performances in the European indoors and throughout February and March of this year. In all Federer won six tournaments, including a record sixth World Tour Finals, the Paris Indoors (for the first time) and Indian Wells. He failed to pass the semifinals at either of the majors. His overall match record was 46-5 (.902), the best on the tour.

Andy Murray won Masters events in Cincinnati and Shanghai, and like Federer reached the semifinals at each of the majors. Aside from a weak effort at Indian Wells, he seems to have eschewed his habitual post-Melbourne failure-bender, which has only helped his ranking. He also cleaned up the entire Asian swing last September, thereby impressing everyone except Federer, whose vaguely dismissive comments inspired rancour among those Murray fans who are inclined toward defensiveness, which is to say most of them. The highlight was his third set masterpiece in the Tokyo final, in which he allowed Nadal just four points. In all Murray claimed five hardcourt titles, and compiled a record of 42-8 (.840).

Rafael Nadal's hardcourt season was arguably the most disappointing of his career, insofar as he failed to win a single tournament, and therefore sustained the amazing streak of having never defended a hardcourt title. At the same time, he reached three finals, including at the US Open and the Australian Open, where he unhappily discovered Djokovic. His hardcourt efforts were punctuated by several self-enforced sabbaticals, following the Shanghai Masters, and after the Australian Open. Nadal's hardcourt season ended with a withdrawal from the Miami semifinals last weekend, citing knee tendinitis. There is a fervent hope that his recovery will be swift, given Monte Carlo's traditional role in kick-starting his year, and his ranking's overwhelming reliance on clay and grass results. His overall hardcourt record was 31-10 (.756).

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's hardcourt campaign began auspiciously in Montreal, where he recorded his second straight victory over Federer, although he would go on to lose to the Swiss four times before the end of the year. Tsonga's strongest results came in the European indoors, reaching the finals at Bercy and the Tour Finals, and taking the title in Vienna. His strong performances have as ever been offset by bafflingly poor ones, such as the fourth round loss to Nishikori in Melbourne. However, a sustained period without

grievous injury has finally allowed Tsonga to demonstrate something of his abilities, and he will likely take over the No.5 ranking in the coming weeks. Overall through the hardcourt season he won two titles, and put together a record of 43-14 (.754).

When **John Isner** reached the final of Indian Wells a few weeks ago, there was mild shock among casual fans not only at his defeat of Djokovic, but at the idea that he could come so far. But it's worth remembering that he'd only been a point away from making the previous Masters final, in Bercy. His tendency to become embroiled in draining epics has probably enhanced his reputation, but also ultimately cost him success. Even when he wins, he can rarely muster much resistance in subsequent rounds. This cost him at the Australian Open, where an electrifying five set win over Nalbandian left little in reserve for the eminently beatable Lopez in the next round. For a guy with his weaponry, Isner must learn to win with greater efficiency. Through the hardcourt season, he won one title, and achieved a record of 33-14 (.702).

It is rare for any player's ranking to plummet suddenly for no reason, and the reason is usually injury. **Somdev Devvarman's** shoulder hasn't played tennis since last October, and its ranking has fallen to No.185. **Ricardas Berankis** and his herniated groin are thereabouts, as well, as is **Lleyton Hewitt's** big toe. **Robin Soderling's** ongoing tussle with glandular fever has had profound repercussions on the upper reaches of the men's game. In all the Swede has shed 3,115 points. To lend this flat number some depth: this is more points than the world No.9 (Tipsarevic) has in total. Added to this, the top four have between them shed almost 1,000 points over the hardcourt season. That is a lot of extra points knocking around near the top of the game, providing plenty of nourishment for sufficiently hungry and suitably opportunistic players to gorge themselves on. Soderling was still ranked No.5 when the hardcourt season commenced. He is now No.30, and still yet to attain terminal velocity. In another three months he'll be a respectable crater, and he won't be ranked at all. There is, tragically, talk that he won't return.

Andy Roddick's fall is less readily ascribed to injury, although, being American, it is more amply discussed. There have, of course, been physical issues, but it mostly seems that the game was always fated one day to catch up with him, and that one day it suddenly did. It is to his credit that he outpaced it for so long, and to our lasting wonder that he did so by playing slower. And then he goes and beats Roger Federer. Doing so has dragged his ranking back inside the top 30. He began the hardcourt season ranked No.10.

Like Janko Tipsarevic, whose stated goal of a top twenty finish in 2011 proved excessively modest, **Kei Nishikori's** overshot his erstwhile ambition of achieving Project 45 by a long way. (Project 45, you may recall, was the goal whereby Nishikori would become the highest ranked Japanese male tennis player of all time.) He is now at No.17, and has thus set his successor a hell of a task. Still, it's worth remembering that before he made it past No.45 at the Shanghai Masters, he was comically close for an agonisingly long time. But if Shanghai was his breakthrough, it was his win over Novak Djokovic in the Basel semifinal – the first time a Japanese man had defeated a reigning world No.1 – that proved to be the high point. He began the hardcourt season ranked No.52.⁴

I was courtside at Melbourne Park when **Julien Benneteau** defeated his more-lauded but painfully underfed compatriot Gilles Simon in five sets, although I mercifully only saw the last of them. (Guillermo Coria is the only tennis player I've ever truly disliked, but I would still rather watch him play than Simon, whose game is like a test pattern shorn of its drama.) I've always held Benneteau in high regard, an opinion entirely out of proportion to how often I'd actually bothered to watch him play. It owes everything to his atypical lack of flair and deep reserves of grit, reliably vitiated by dependable gift for crumbling in the biggest moments, all the while remaining utterly French. This afternoon in Melbourne, Benneteau was slightly magnificent and a touch deranged in running down Simon in the fifth.

When the hardcourt season began he was just another ageing journeyman ranked beyond the top hundred, outrun by the race, who'd come close but had never claimed that maiden title. He has since risen 78 places, and augmented his collection with another two runner-up plates. I remarked after the first of these, in Winston-Salem, that he looked like a man who was now 0-5 in career finals, and suspects there won't be a sixth. Well, the sixth came in Sydney in January, where he was cursed to face Jarkko Nieminen, a man who has forgotten more about losing finals than even Benneteau will ever learn. Now ranked No.31 and aged thirty, Benneteau has become the highest ranked player without a title. That's progress.

⁴ *I should register an important qualification here. The period in question – July 2011 to April 2012 – includes a number of results from non-hardcourt events, most notably the Golden Swing and the Davis Cup. These results are of particular importance to players such as David Ferrer and Nicolas Almagro, but also to Nishikori.*

Matthew Ebden began the hardcourt season ranked No.139, and finished it at No.75. I first saw Ebden play in Brisbane in 2011, when he shocked everyone by defeating Denis Istomin. Interviewed afterwards, Ebden was wracked by residual tremors, visibly shaken by the magnitude of the upset. It had certainly looked like an upset, with the Australian appearing woefully over-matched by the Uzbek journeyman, who had nonetheless contrived to string together enough errors to secure the loss (over 16,000 from memory). Ebden earned a wildcard into the Australian Open on the back of this, and sufficient exposure that those Australians who only attend the event in order to wave flags at obscure compatriots – which is most of them – included him in their meticulously wrought itineraries. He lost to Michael Russell in the first round.

I cannot recall seeing him again until Tokyo in October, when as a qualifier he toiled through to the round of 16, and there took a set from David Ferrer. The following week in Shanghai, again obliged to qualify, he attained the quarterfinals, knocking out Ryan Harrison and Gilles Simon en route. I have no idea what he had been doing in the meantime, but from my time-lapsed perspective he was suddenly a different player: faster, calmer and smarter.

Comparisons to Ferrer are appropriate. Like the Spaniard, Ebden has not allowed a lack of brawn to curtail a fundamentally attacking impulse – those who regard Ferrer as an exclusively defensive player have got it very wrong – and boasts a similar capacity when on his game to punch well above his weight. Buttressing these tendencies is a fairly assured all-court game, good mobility and an impressive calmness at key moments. Of course, he is not as fast as Ferrer, nor as technically assured, and he may well never breach the top fifty. Nevertheless, his exploits in Asia last year earned him a year in the top 100 – and the luxury of regular direct entry into ATP events – and so far he seems to be doing enough to stay there. Perhaps ironically, his best result came at Indian Wells a few weeks ago, when he was again compelled to qualify, before straight-setting Mardy Fish on the way to the fourth round.

Davis Cup Quarterfinals

That's Davis Cup for You

Day One

The first day of the 2012 Davis Cup World Group quarterfinals has concluded, and three of the four ties are balanced intriguingly at a rubber each. The other tie, involving Spain at home, has hardly intrigued at all, although Alex Corretja's remarks afterwards – essentially: 'Well, that went even easier than we thought it would' – were refreshingly frank.

Of the other six matches, two were ostensibly upsets, although one of these – Isner d. Simon – was largely just a failure of the bookmaker's art. The other upset – Cilic d. Nalbandian – was a soul-lacerating carnival of ineptitude played out in an atmosphere of virulent machismo, prompting one to wonder just how poor a crowd has to behave before it no longer merits an indulgent chuckle: 'Well, that's Davis Cup for you . . .'

Serbia v Czech Rep., Prague, 1-1

Berdych d. Troicki, 6/2 6/1 6/2

Tipsarevic d. Stepanek, 5/7 6/4 6/4 4/6 9/7

The centrepiece of today's spread was undoubtedly the second match between Serbia and the Czech Republic, an improbably sustained, highly dramatic and technically uninspiring dust-up between Janko Tipsarevic and Radek Stepanek, which concluded in a flurry of ill-will, and almost a flurry of blows. Being controversial, this is the moment destined to survive.

Tipsarevic had battled the partisan crowd and, periodically, the umpire on his way to a five hour victory, saving three match points along the way. I had seen nothing untoward between him and his opponent, and there had been at least one example of good sportsmanship. (There was by some accounts an issue with a disputed double-bounce in the second set, though I confess I did not see it.) Tipsarevic claimed the match with a final backhand pass up the line, whereupon he commenced the required sequence of bellows at his support bench. Stepanek marched sourly to the net, and offered the Serb a weak handshake, and they exchanged some words. Tipsarevic paused, visibly gob smacked, and began to remonstrate furiously at Stepanek's back, and was restrained by both the Serbian and Czech captains. It wasn't immediately clear what had happened. Interviewed afterwards, Tipsarevic revealed that Stepanek had in fact given him the

finger during the handshake, and had summarily pronounced him to be a stinking vagina, or words to that effect. His comments were in Serbian, and every effort at translating them via Google has turned out to be a) contradictory, and b) hilarious ('He told me I was smelling something like a natural woman'). Nevertheless, it was clear from his tone that giving someone the finger and comparing them to malodorous genitalia is no more complimentary in Eastern Europe than here in Australia, where it is frowned upon.

Inevitably, the incident has received plenty of airtime, and unfortunately overshadowed Stepanek's greater transgression, which was the public unveiling of a t-shirt that was vile even by his standards. It appears to be some variety of obese leonine creature, over which is draped the Czech coat of arms. Tomas Berdych, whose otherwise similar outfit mercifully lacked mutant lions, had earlier thrashed the hapless Viktor Troicki. The doubles tomorrow should be fun, and the reverse singles even funner.

Argentina v Croatia, Buenos Aires, 1-1

Cilic d. Nalbandian, 5/7 6/4 4/6 7/6 6/3

Del Potro d. Karlovic, 6/2 7/6 6/1

Meanwhile David Nalbandian, if not Argentina's greatest Davis Cup player then certainly its most famously committed, lost to Marin Cilic in a staggeringly uneven five set match. At the extremes of quality, statistics usually tell the story, and this match bears that out. The two men produced a combined 241 unforced errors (128 to Nalbandian). Both players served below 50%, and attained an aggregate 10/40 on break point conversion. What the stats don't tell you is how it actually felt to endure the match. As a viewer I certainly had a better time of it than the participants, since the miasma of hopeless ennui dissipated quite quickly, whereas each player must also overcome physical exhaustion. Their wealth and fame probably helps to make up the difference, though.

The issue was raised in last year's Davis Cup final of why Nalbandian wasn't selected to play singles on the opening day, instead of either Juan Martin del Potro or Juan Monaco. The issue now, apparently, is why Monaco wasn't playing in place of Nalbandian. The lesson, presumably, is that when you lose the strategy was always the wrong one. Del Potro then demolished Ivo Karlovic, who might have taken the second set had he played smarter on any of his four set points, though he never looked much like winning the match.

USA v France, Monte Carlo, 1-1

Tsonga d. Harrison, 7/5 6/2 2/6 6/2

Isner d. Simon, 6/3 6/2 7/5

John Isner recorded his second 'upset' on clay in as many matches, although beating Gilles Simon is not quite comparable to beating Roger Federer. Nonetheless, it was a masterpiece of sustained aggression from Isner, which is hardly surprising, since he seems physically and temperamentally incapable of playing any other way. These two met several weeks ago in Indian Wells, with Isner narrowly prevailing on his way to the final. Grit, luck and crowd support got him through that one. None of those factors proved relevant today, because he was playing in France, and because performances this complete never require one to display their true mettle.

I suggested a few days ago that Isner needs to learn how to win quickly, although I didn't have Simon in mind, against whom even the most accomplished attackers prevail only gradually, if at all. In all, it was a masterful performance from the giant American, who suggested earlier in the week that he wasn't just a serve and a forehand. By his standards, he wasn't even a serve today, but his forehand was potent enough to achieve the twin miracles of cutting through the Monte Carlo surface and of getting past Simon, time and again.

Speaking of sustained aggression, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga earlier defeated Ryan Harrison in fine style but for a third set let-down, smacking winners all over the place. As expected, the Frenchman moves up to No.5 in the world, supplanting David Ferrer. There was also a cockerel, signifying, er . . . Well, that's Davis Cup for you.

The Thing about Assumptions

Day Three

Czech Rep. d. Serbia, 4-1

Berdych d. Tipsarevic, 7/6 7/6 7/6

In twenty years' time, someone poring over old tennis scores might chance upon today's Davis Cup results, and might make certain assumptions – entirely erroneous – as to how the matches played out. (Positing this theoretical future 'historian' entails a simultaneously bleak and optimistic view of the future, in which poor lonely bastards are permitted to pursue their niche whimsies freely, and aren't simply harvested for their

organs. This suggests that at some point in the next two decades the west might enjoy a break in conservative governance. But I digress.)

Of course, a score line of 7/6 7/6 7/6 is an easy one to draw the wrong conclusions from. Being straight sets, one might assume it was straight forward. With every set ascending to a tiebreak, one might also, as with the famous US Open quarterfinal between Sampras and Agassi, assume it was tight. But you know what they say about assumptions: 'they have an established tendency to make you and I look foolish.' (They don't say what happens in the case of pre-existing idiots, but assumptions probably don't help.) Janko Tipsarevic, however, doesn't need to assume anything in order to look foolish. He just needs a tennis ball in his hand, and the opportunity to serve for a set.

Tipsarevic served for both the first and second sets, and both times he was broken back by Tomas Berdych without achieving set point (although he did find one in the second set tiebreak, and promptly discarded it). However, the most telling moment came at 5/3 in the first set tiebreak, as Tipsarevic left a ball that landed in, a moment that told us that in lieu of genuine belief, he had only haggard, desperate hope.

Having established his credentials for gagging a lead, Tipsarevic essayed a different approach in the third set. Figuring that serving for a set was a doomed enterprise, he instead saved his big push for the inevitable breaker, although not before blowing a couple more set points on Berdych's serve at 6/5. The Serb established a commanding lead in the tiebreak, and at 6/3 held three more set points. Belief might have won him one, but, as I say, he had none. Berdych saved them all, and took the set, and the match, and the tie. The Czech Republic moves through to the Davis Cup semifinals.

It would be foolish to suggest this match was ever going to be a simple affair. Keen disciples of The Tipsarevic will recall his urgent, and painful, loss to Berdych in the Tour Finals last year, when the Serb wasted a match point in the second set tiebreaker. Or how about two weeks earlier, at the Paris Indoors, where Tipsarevic led 5/1 in the first set, only to lose it 5/7, and 4/2 in the second, only to go down 6/4? The point is he has form.

But nor should we pretend that Berdych has been amazing of late. He hasn't. This is only his second top-ten victory of 2012, the other being the infamously feisty win over Nicolas Almagro at the Australian Open, in which we discovered that while the Tin Man may not have a heart, he does have a certain flair for melodrama, as he collapsed as though pole-axed upon sustaining a ball to the arm. Nevertheless, Berdych clinched all three wins this weekend (he paired with Stepanek in the doubles), and there is some

hope that recent upgrades will see him prove competitive through the clay and grass seasons to come.

United States d. France, 3-2

Isner d. Tsonga, 6/3 7/6 5/7 6/4

Comical scenes in Prague had earlier taken over from emotional ones in Monte Carlo, where the USA had completed a strong victory over France. Guy Forget announced his retirement from the captaincy on court afterwards, thereby reducing the French players to open weeping. Llodra and Benneteau took it particularly hard, perhaps because their doubles loss yesterday proved instrumental in accelerating Forget's departure. For Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, this news merely compounded his disappointment at losing the decisive rubber to John Isner.

He was right to feel disappointment, but he'd be fooling himself to feel shame. Tsonga played well under immense pressure to keep the tie alive, but few men could have withstood Isner today, who is now clearly the No.1 American player in all but ranking, and who wears the responsibility lightly and calmly. Tsonga is a categorically better player than Gilles Simon, but Isner handled him comprehensively, remaining crushingly assertive on all but one of the key points, and only rarely allowing the Frenchman to set his feet. There is always a constricting pressure when facing a titanic server, even one like Ivo Karlovic who doesn't exceed mere adequacy in any other of the game's facets. However, Isner has fashioned himself into an imposing all-court figure. The forehand is notorious, but today it was outrageous. He seemed to go whole sets without missing one, which was particularly impressive given the demands he was imposing on it. I can barely recall a forehand that was played safely, and every time he lashed one, Tsonga began running. He was solid on backhand, reckless on passing shots, and imposing at the net, winning 37/49.

Before Forget took the microphone, there was a wonderfully genial moment as Isner went over to the opposition bench and shook hands or embraced each member of the French team. The local crowd applauded warmly. Time will of course tell, but there is a real sense that a weekend such as this might be the making of Isner. If he can go on to achieve a result commensurate with his frame and his game - such as winning a Major - he is sufficiently affable that he might achieve a truly trans-national popularity, of the type that Fish lacks, and that Roddick is systematically eroding. Speaking of which, it was heartening to see Novak Djokovic out supporting the Davis Cup players, even if he wasn't playing, and even if the players weren't his compatriots (who were hundreds of miles away proving they simply cannot do without him).

The Americans have now won consecutive ties away from home, on European clay; in a gloomy barn in Fribourg, and at the most picturesque tennis club in the world; on stodgy Catholic dirt and hedonistic Mediterranean silt. The choice of surface when facing the USA has been a no-brainer for years. Assuming your players are at least half-decent on it, you always go with clay. Now, with the US flourishing under Jim Courier's captaincy and spearheaded by Isner, the decision has become rather more fraught. Unless, of course, you're Spain. As coincidence would have it, next up the USA faces Spain, in Spain. Almost certainly, it will be clay. Without question, it will be interesting.

Argentina d. Croatia, 4-1

Del Potro d. Cilic, 6/1 6/2 6/1

Our future lonely historian will look back at this one, and will feel sure that this was not a particularly close match. He or she will be entirely correct, and can be permitted their smug glow of satisfaction, since they probably don't have much else going on. Juan Martin del Potro won 95 points to Marin Cilic's 52, although Cilic if pressed could point to some impressive numbers of his own: before today's match he had already spent over ten hours on court this weekend. On clay, in Argentina, there was sadly no way this one was going to be competitive. It was just baseline slugging – del Potro won 0/0 points at the net – scored to wildly catchy patriotic chanting, mostly between points. For del Potro, his elation contrasted nicely with his desolation following last year's final.

Still, it provided interest in that it sustained one of the key themes of the weekend, which was that the doubles rubber is pivotal in close ties. Spain, whose tie wasn't close, is the exception, and has appeared content to sacrifice the middle Saturday for a while now, without discernible impact on their overwhelming success. But hard-fought victories in the doubles provided clear momentum for the Czechs, Americans and Argentineans, and they all wrapped up their respective ties in the first of the reverse singles.

Argentina will play the Czech Republic in the semifinals.

Empty, Blissful and Still

The Next Point Enterprises, in conjunction with Hallmark and the South Australian Board of Agriculture, is proud to announce the release of a truly inspirational gift, just in time for Mother's Day.

The Roger Rasheed 2012 Desk Calendar collects, for the first time, all of Roger's greatest tweets, presented daily, which clinical research has proven is the ideal frequency at which to be drip-fed pure inspiration. South Australia's favourite son shares with the North Korean military junta and the self-help section of your airport bookstore an unwavering belief that a positive message will carry the day. No problem is so great that it cannot be solved by throwing metaphors at it.

Here's a sample:

- You can't buy effort, mental day to day strength and hunger for the competition, YOU TRAIN IT and BELIEVE in it. Game set match Nadal. #Miami
- Persistence, with that you will create opportunities, with the effort & education you have gathered along the way success will come. #journey
- Opportunities will be put in front of you in life, business & sport, take them & watch the different pathways they present you with. #bluesky
- The only challenge in life is to challenge yourself- you will be greatly rewarded and develop into a quality person through the process.

If Tony Robbins was to become a serial killer, these are the notes he would leave on his victims. For that personal touch, most messages are then topped with a saccharine hashtag, like a glacé cherry from the depths of grandma's pantry. But it isn't all sweet. Roger doesn't pull his punches:

- Novak v Baghdatis 6/46/4, if Baggy had the right strong matured people around him post his Oz Open r/up his career would have been different.

Sadly for Baghdatis, he opted for strong matured cheese, instead. If only this calendar had appeared sooner! But it's not all sport. Prospective parents cannot afford to be without this calendar, either:

- If you have kids starting school this year take the time to hang with them before the bell rings, they love you taking an interest. #goldtime

And if your boss is curious why you're always late each morning, just show him this. Perhaps make *Goldtime!* your personal motto. Have a t-shirt made up. Compose a theme song.

There you have it: the perfect gift, for only \$12.95 + postage & handling. Each individual message is also available as an inspirational fridge magnet. Order today!⁵

For all that Rasheed's tweets are creepy and kitsch, and therefore consistent with his television commentary, there is no reason to think his advice is wrong. He presumably knows what it takes to excel at all levels of sport, from the juniors – where his foundation is active – to the elite, where he found fame coaching Lleyton Hewitt and Gael Monfils. The depressing thing is not that his advice is poor; it's that it is good. A keen sense of reality, of the world's true nature, is the last thing an elite athlete needs.

I have often wondered to what extent a kind of willed obtuseness is necessary for a top athlete to flourish, at least for those to whom obtuseness doesn't come naturally. For example, it has always seemed to me that Andy Murray is too clever for his own good, too aware of the execrable texture of life; everything is made of shit. Like all born ironists, he finds it difficult to look past this and, fundamentally, he probably believes that to do so is to betray something more important than a mere tennis career.

Robin Soderling seems to be cut from similar cloth, and that sardonic smirk appears for all the world to be his ironic defence against a brainlessly macho environment that he finds otherwise intolerable. I suspect his tendency to remain apart from the other players is related to this. Even though the tour is more fragmented than it was a decade ago, especially to hear Marat Safin tell it, Soderling still never seemed interested in being one of the boys. His sudden rise three years ago owed as much to Magnus Norman simplifying his approach to the sport, rather than any profound technical adjustments. He stopped thinking so much. The cliché is that 99 per cent of sport is between the ears, but the real trick is to leave that space empty, so that it can be filled with nothing but instinct, talent and (mostly) training.

Janko Tipsarevic is the latest exemplar of this, achieving the necessary mental clarity with savage efficiency, virtually lobotomising himself in order to drown out the polyphony of human concern. He recently remarked in an interview that he is now 'trying to make my life in a way that 2 and 2 and 2 and 2 adds up to eight. I am not trying to divide or multiply anything.' This seems clear proof, despite Tipsarevic's recent success, that simplified thinking can go too far, leading back to complexity, via idiocy. I'm not

⁵ *Pregnant women should consult their physician.*

sure how the interviewer kept a straight face at this point, but he could have at least pointed out that 4×2 will get you to 8 even quicker: a little multiplication goes a long way. Had Rasheed been the interviewer, however, I can imagine him nodding knowingly, as though Tipsarevic had uttered something searingly useful, and not just blindingly commonplace. At the very least, it would have merited a retweet.

Again, this is not to suggest that Rasheed would be wrong. Indeed, given Tipsarevic's recent success – ignoring last weekend's Davis Cup – I'd suggest Rasheed is overwhelmingly right. There are so many things wrong in the world that in order to function at all we must edit almost all of them out. I can only write this column in the awareness that there are far more productive things I could be doing in order to improve the lot of strangers. Irony is not the only way of coping, or necessarily even the best, but it's better than going mad. However, in order to win tennis matches at the elite level, even the awareness of what you're shutting out is a crippling intrusion. There is simply no space in which to consider anything but what you are doing, with a little heed paid to whatever motivational kitsch you happen to subscribe to. To become distracted in a competitive match is to lose. Monfils, previously in the care of Rasheed, too often concerns himself with the crowd's enjoyment, with dire results. When he remains single-minded, he is imposing indeed. (Mark Waugh, in a different sport, frequently fell prey to a similar vice. Despite all the skill and grace in the world, he would grow distracted by the urge to entertain, and he'd trudge skilfully and gracefully back to the pavilion soon after.)

This is not to privilege sport unduly, although we shouldn't pretend that sport is not privileged. Concert pianists – virtual shorthand for privilege – practice a discipline in which concentration cannot lapse for half an hour at a time, if not longer; no moment between points, and no sit down at the change of ends. Any cock-up spells disaster. For trauma surgeons, it can mean catastrophe. Again, there is no corollary that the top tennis players are therefore dim-witted off the court – they mostly aren't – although I do wonder to what extent it would matter if they were. What really matters is that they can deploy a savant-like focus on cue and that whatever they might personally feel about the day's news or even the match so far is not permitted to hamper the tens of thousands of hours they've spent preparing for that moment. For the duration of each point, at their best, they are empty, blissful, perfect, narrow and still.

The Clay Season

The High Point of the Season

The Monte Carlo draw isn't out until tomorrow, but, alone among tournaments, this offers no reason not to analyse it. The two salient features are already known: Rafael Nadal will play, and so will Novak Djokovic. Just this once, we can permit ourselves to pre-tape the weather report, so to speak. Anyway, what's the alternative? I suppose I could talk about Houston, and the bombastically titled US Men's Clay Court Championship (named with typical restraint; this is a nation that calls its baseball competition the World Series. Don't get me started on Miss Universe). The Houston draw is admittedly more cosmopolitan than, say, Atlanta's, although there is still a preponderance of locals. This is their right, of course, since they're US Men, and this is their Championship.

Endless threnodies on the shortage of American clay court prowess are not unmerited. Formally, they're all passacaglias on the same theme, and it's a theme that rings true. The reigning US Men's Clay Court champion is Ryan Sweeting. It's debatable which surface Sweeting is a specialist on, but I'll hazard that this isn't it. He's through to the quarterfinals, having beaten Bobby Reynolds, who I find hard not to picture as Richie Cunningham. Michael Russell, who once led the mighty Gustavo Kuerten by two sets at Roland Garros, has finally earned the upset we believed was in him, by seeing off Mardy Fish. Fish was the top seed, but he isn't well. Most reports are citing fatigue. Some are insisting it's chronic, and a syndrome. Fish is still ranked No.9, but in the 2012 race he's a lowly No.37, one spot below the illustrious Bjorn Phau. Nadal's yearned-for two year ranking system would delay Fish's departure from the top ten by months, which is surely a pretty succinct argument against it.

The match of the tournament so far was Kevin Anderson's three set win over Sam Querrey today. Querrey's coach Brad Gilbert appeared on Twitter remarking that his charge won more points and games, and yet still lost, apparently having just discovered this is possible. Hopefully, empowered with this new knowledge, Gilbert can teach Querrey that some points are more important than others, and that the very important ones habitually congregate in the third set tiebreaker. Lose those, and little else matters. Still more people are treating this as an upset, despite Anderson being ranked 70 places higher. Querrey remains stranded at No.103 (ten spots below the illustrious Bjorn Phau). Where do these expectations come from? Phau, incidentally and illustriously, lost 6/1 6/0 to Carlos Berlocq.

The unfortunate fact is that only John Isner has displayed much aptitude for dirt lately (don't imagine that as an Australian I feel at all superior about this). The decision to play Houston was thus baffling. One assumes the appearance fee played as decisive a role as the 'love' he professes to feel for the event, but it has guaranteed his foolish decision to withdraw from Monte Carlo next week, despite his Davis Cup heroics at that venue just last week. I'll always be the last one to say that Monte Carlo matters, but it should matter more than Houston, even if the latter *is* a National Championship. As I write, Isner has just seen off Horacio Zeballos in three sets. Ryan Harrison is also through to the quarterfinals, having defeated a 'pair' of Russians in Alex Bogomolov and Igor Kunitsyn. Harrison was also in Monte Carlo last weekend, and is not going back.

This aversion to European dirt merely reinforces a tendency that has lately hardened into a policy among US men. In the six years since 2005, only once has an American entered the main draw for Monte Carlo (Querrey in 2008). For all that Monte Carlo is the only Masters tournament that isn't mandatory, and although its value as preparation for Roland Garros is questionable, this statistic still reveals the extent to which American players have largely given up on clay. They subsequently turn up in Europe by ones and twos during Madrid and Rome, but even then they don't seem to take it very seriously. Of course, they're unlikely to win these events, especially Monte Carlo, but there's such a thing as playing to improve, and mastering all aspects of the sport. There's a great deal to be said for professionalism. As a consequence, the top American players – Roddick, Fish, previously Blake – never look adequately prepared for Paris. The year's second Major seems merely to be something they must endure before Wimbledon. From that perspective, Houston's status as the US Men's Clay Court Championship is not overstated at all. For the US men, it really is the high point of their clay court season.

Anyway, back to the Monte Carlo draw . . . Oh, I'm out of time.

Luck of the Draw: Monte Carlo 2012

Depending on who you talk to, the outcome of the Monte Carlo Masters will have ramifications for the rest of the clay court season extending all the way from the profound up to the negligible. If Rafael Nadal wins, he'll win Paris. If Novak Djokovic wins, he'll win everything. If someone else wins . . . well, no one really knows what that will mean. The last time something like that happened the Mediterranean rose up, and swallowed Atlantis.

I confess that I am no great advocate of the Monte Carlo tournament, although my apathy towards it stems entirely from scheduling, as opposed to any fault I can find with

the event itself. Few could cavil at the location: call me a sucker for a links court, but on the tour only Umag and perhaps Båstad can rival it for picturesqueness, and neither can match its cachet. But Monte Carlo is contested so far out from Roland Garros that it frankly feels disconnected from it, for all that many pundits talk up the similarities of the surface, and parade the fact that the Monte Carlo champion so often wins in Paris. In recent years there's been a pretty good reason for that.

If ever there was an *idée fixe* unlikely to come unstuck, it is the rusted-on assumption that Nadal will go on winning Monte Carlo until both his knees grow so unstable they are declared a security risk. Seven of Nadal's record 19 Masters titles have come in Monte Carlo, and he hasn't lost there since 2003, when he was eight years old, and forced to face three opponents simultaneously – Coria, Moya, and Kuerten – wielding only a badminton racquet, strung with natural (sparrow) gut. If he wins it again this year, he will join Guillermo Vilas as the only man to have won the same title eight times in the Open era. Given Nadal's history at this venue, and his prowess on this surface, there is no way he can actually have a tough draw, since he cannot face Djokovic before the final. But there's easy, and then there's *easy*. Nadal's draw this year is unquestionably of the latter variety. If its easiness were any more italicised the letters would be horizontal.

Of course, Nadal, if pressed, will go to extravagant lengths to refute his favouritism, up to and including an impromptu deconstruction of favouritism as a concept. It's just one of those things, although it's one of the things I have little time for. (The best clay courter in history doesn't necessarily have to anoint himself the greatest, but he can at least concede he's better than, say Jarkko Nieminen. To say so wouldn't be to insult Nieminen, and to pretend otherwise is just weird.) As luck would have it, Nadal will face either Nieminen or Radek Stepanek following his first round bye. I'm calling him the favourite for that one, and convention be damned.

He'll probably find Nicolas Almagro in the quarterfinals, against whom he is 7-0, although this should be qualified: in one of those matches Nadal almost nearly lost. His semifinal opponent could be anyone, although not anyone of concern. Had Federer played, it would have been his quarter. But it isn't, so it's Tsonga's, the new No.5. The Frenchman isn't much chop on dirt, though, so there's no good reason to think he'll reach the final four. If compelled to pick, I'd pick Philipp Kohlschreiber, just because he's thrilling to watch when he's winning. Raonic, Tipsarevic and Verdasco are in there as well. Really any of them could scrape and claw their way to the semifinals, and then be torn to shreds by Nadal. The only issue will be those geriatric knees, now held together with depleted uranium pins. He's had his treatment, and appears to be moving fine in

practice. But at least his more fanatical fans can now agree that even progressing to the final will be 'almost impossible'.

The pertinent question, amply asked already, will be what might happen if he discovers Novak Djokovic lurking there. The more pressing question, however, will be whether Djokovic gets there at all. His draw is not easy. Arguably, the world No.1 is no more likely to lose before the quarterfinals than Nadal – some combination of Seppi, Tomic, Istomin and Dolgoplov – but once there it'll be tough. David Ferrer waits in the last eight (assuming the Spaniard makes it past Juan Monaco, who will himself be wearied from a pointless week in Houston). Ferrer on slow clay is different from Ferrer on a slow hardcourt. Djokovic should win, but not in a hurry.

After that the Serb will face the winner of Andy Murray's quarter, which will probably be Andy Murray, who has celebrated his union with Ivan Lendl by adopting the latter's barber, the *ne plus ultra* of respect. Murray is of course sufficiently talented that he can lose to anyone at any moment for any reason – even Viktor Troicki in the second round – but he should reach the quarterfinals, and he should beat Tomas Berdych when he gets there. I'm confident Djokovic will endure Ferrer and Murray's ministrations, but he won't be unscarred. Nonetheless, if he and Nadal do face off in the final, Djokovic will doubtless be installed as the favourite by the bookmakers, and all the fans other than his own.

Consistent with the event's mostly ill-defined function, there have been a number of notable no-shows, most of whom did not bother to invent an injury. Del Potro is saving himself for Estoril. Federer is toiling away in Dubai. Isner has his heart set on becoming the US Men's Clay Court Champion. Fish and Roddick are American, and therefore don't play Monte Carlo. Gasquet and Monfils actually are injured. Otherwise, the most notable attendee is Ivan Ljubicic. Monte Carlo will be his last professional tennis tournament. He is in Tsonga's quarter. Perhaps *he* will make the semifinal.

Used Dishwater

Houston, Final

(4) Monaco d. (2) Isner, 6/2 3/6 6/3

Juan Monaco today earned himself a career-high ranking of No.14, the right to call himself the US Men's Clay Court Champion, and a potentially decisive bone-weariness as he decamps for Monte Carlo, where it will be compounded by jet-lag. Thus debilitated, he will face Robin Haase almost immediately, and can therefore feel confident that either

a win or a loss will come quickly. There is a very real possibility that he will be out of the tournament before I overcome my annual, facile delight that Monaco is playing in Monaco.

Come what may in Monaco (the principality), Monaco (the player) proved unbeatable on Houston's drab clay – apparently it is hosed down with used dishwater each morning – cracking open the hitherto impenetrable serve of John Isner three times. Both players bore the indelible marks of yesterday's semifinals. In the case of Isner, the excruciating win over Feliciano Lopez expressed itself in a surplus of lactic acid, which lent the American's characteristic air of pedestrian exhaustion a certain authenticity, at least through the opening set. (To be fair, none of us emerged from that semifinal psychically intact, but at least our physical recovery was brief.) In Monaco's case, he was typically spry, and doubtless buoyed by the knowledge that, come what may, the final could not be as lethally dull as his win over Michael Russell had been. What followed was a modestly engaging yet ultimately forgettable final, in which Isner served poorly and Monaco ran lots. Monaco afterwards celebrated by submerging himself in the dishwater tank, which, as health risks go, still ranks somewhere below the Yarra River.

With the Championships completed for another year, this will be the last we see of the US Men for a while, unless you live in the United States, where they are still permitted to roam free. By reaching the final, Isner has supplanted Mardy Fish as the highest ranked US Man, the twelfth chap to be so honoured. (With that pressure lifted from his shoulders, there is surely hope for a change in Fish's fortunes. He probably won't win much more, but at least his losses will generate less commentary.) Tennis.com typically contrived to spin Isner's achievement into a lament for American tennis:

'The first four men to hold the top U.S. ranking—Stan Smith, Jimmy Connors, John McEnroe, and Andre Agassi—combined for 25 Grand Slam singles titles. The middle four of Michael Chang, Brad Gilbert, Jim Courier and Pete Sampras combined for 19 major titles, while the last four—Andy Roddick, James Blake, Fish and Isner—own just one Slam in singles, Roddick's victory at the 2003 U.S. Open. Neither Blake, Fish nor [sic] Isner has reached the semifinals of a major.'

I'm not sure precisely who they're angry at here. Perhaps it is merely a generalised fury that their recent top players chose their era so unwisely.

Monte Carlo Masters, First Round

Dodig d. Ljubicic, 6/0 6/3

Play has already commenced in Monte Carlo, although in line with official policy only those actually attending are permitted to see the early rounds. There is, apparently, a real risk that players outside the top twenty will gain dangerous exposure if televised, leading to civil unrest. As with Miami, when no one saw Fernando Gonzalez' last match, this issue has become particularly pressing in Monte Carlo, where no one saw Ivan Ljubicic's. The Croatian today lost in the first round to compatriot Ivan Dodig. The ATP released a commemorative video. There was a presentation on court afterwards, which was, by all accounts, rather moving.

It was also rather short, since the event needed the court urgently. There's been rain aplenty in Monte Carlo over the weekend – literally *tumbling* from the sky – and the qualifying schedule is sodden and rent. Most players were on court twice today, assuming they won their first match, which precisely half of them didn't. Grigor Dimitrov did win his first, but lost his second to Mikhail Kukushkin. Arnaud Clement, who is older even than Ljubicic, lost his first. How does he keep going? The day's remaining first round matches saw the necessary losses of the two local wildcards, Jeremy Chardy and Benjamin Balleret. They were valuable wildcards that could have been better spent. I wonder if Dimitrov feels aggrieved he didn't receive one. I'm not suggesting he deserved it.

Streaks and Bagels

Monte Carlo Masters, First and Second Rounds

(4) Tsonga d. Kohlschreiber, 6/2 6/4

(3) Murray d. Troicki, 6/0 6/3

There is a persistent belief, and one that I share in spite of my better judgement, that Jo-Wilfried Tsonga is a fundamentally streaky player. This is unfair, and inaccurate. Even in an era in which the top four monopolise the available points, it is difficult to ascend to No.5 in the world without achieving consistent results. There might still be hot streaks, but those sudden skyward forays require a sturdy launch pad. (The question of how high a truly streaky player might rise is debatable. If surface is no issue, it is defined by Tomas Berdych. If surface and geographical location are limiting factors, there is Mardy Fish.) There was a time – it is even within living memory for all but toddlers and YouTube commenters – when the tendency periodically to lose to players ranked below

you was not called streakiness. It was just called tennis. Of late, the top three have taught us differently, by rarely losing to anyone but each other. It has been a tough lesson for Andy Murray, who remains atavistically committed to losing matches to anyone, sometimes.

Last year at Roland Garros, Murray seemed committed to losing to Viktor Troicki, and was late, though not too late, in reconsidering. He hobbled through, painfully, keeping his perfect record against the Serb intact. Today Troicki demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction that last year's French Open will remain his best chance at beating Murray. Through the first set he never looked like getting a game; he was broken three times, and without apparently difficulty. There was plenty of variety in the points – patient exchanges, scrambling all-court flurries, sudden attacks – and Murray won them all, however he wanted to. The second set was closer, but this is only a relative term. Troicki wasn't close to winning it.

Nick Lester and Chris Wilkinson on the TennisTV feed lapsed immediately in smug complacency, the way English pundits do when the Scot is well on top. The best example of this was in last year's US Open, when Murray won ten straight games and looked to be cruising against Robin Haase, before a violent resurgence by the Dutchman had the commentators eating crow. Today, of course, Troicki mounted no such counter-surge, which afforded Lester and Wilkinson ample space in which to extol Murray's virtues, with devastating loquacity. One of them insisted that there is no top player better at making world-class opponents look average, apparently forgetting that Murray himself is pretty world-class, and has been made to look decidedly average by all three of his elite peers. The long-smothered question of whether Murray is the most talented player out of the top four was duly resuscitated. An awkward ramble on the nature of talent eventually yielded the generous concession that Federer might equal Murray in this regard.

Murray's rapid dismissal of Troicki brought Tsonga and Philipp Kohlschreiber on to court in short order, for which I was grateful. Lester and Wilkinson, orgasmically spent, went off for a lie down, and Peter Fleming took over. Seasoned professional that he is, he wasted only a few games before essaying the contractually-required comparison between Tsonga and Muhammad Ali (by way of Joe Frazier). The experienced commentators come prepared with a crib sheet, and get an early start on ticking off each item. Unfortunately, he'd apparently brought the wrong notes for Kohlschreiber, several times suggesting that the German was 'a real pro', who 'knew how to get it done' when the key moments come around. In fact, no definition of 'streaky' would be complete without a portrait of Kohlschreiber to set it off.

My pre-tournament pick was that the German might streak through this open quarter, all the way to the semifinals, and there lose heroically to Rafael Nadal. Clearly, my judgement had been clouded by the superannuated view of Tsonga as a mercurial headcase, reinforced by the awareness that he was at his worst on clay. By no means was Tsonga terrific today, but it's only the second round of a Masters, and he didn't need to be. He was typically aggressive, but he was also sufficiently solid, and his risks were always reserved for prudent moments and makeable shots. Kohlschreiber, however, would typically save his wildest flights for 0-15 or 0-30. Even if he was a seasoned campaigner who knew how to play the big points, he allowed those big points to come around far too often. In the first set, the big points were break points on his own serve. This isn't to say he didn't have plenty of chances on Tsonga's serve, especially in the second set. A streaky player is not a bad player, and there was plenty of hot stuff to go with the cold. He gained six break points against the Frenchman in the second set, but converted none of them. A poor last service game ended it, capped by a final rally in which Tsonga sparred patiently, and Kohlschreiber thrust another backhand into the net.

Haase d. (11) Monaco, 7/5 0/6 2/3 ret.

It is well known that the Nice tournament, played the week before the French Open, is cursed, that the champion on the Cote d'Azur is destined to fall in the first round the following week. The last two years they've blown a two set lead. Why top players continue to show up in Nice at all is beyond me. A similar question might be made of Juan Monaco's determination to be crowned US Men's Clay Court Champion in Houston last week, the week before the somewhat more illustrious Monte Carlo Masters, thereby depriving an American of this coveted accolade. It didn't help that he saw off Michael Russell (a Houston resident) and John Isner in the final two rounds. Neither the gods nor the Department of Homeland Security were likely to let this matter slide. Today, up a break in the final set against Robin Haase, Monaco rolled his ankle viciously, and two points later was forced to retire. No news has emerged as to the seriousness of the injury. It's worth pointing out that Monaco blew a 4/2 lead in the first set, and so shouldn't have been in a deciding set at all. There was also a lengthy rain delay. It's also worth pointing out that the last time the Argentine ascended to No.14 in the world was in 2007, whereupon he rolled his ankle badly. Think about it. If it's not the work of capricious gods or humourless men in suits, then what is it?

Appalling luck, that's what it is. And a damned shame.

Sodden Balls and a Tin Sky

Monte Carlo Masters, Third Round

Haase d. Bellucci, 6/2 6/3

Last week in Casablanca, Robin Haase, not the latest great hope of Dutch tennis but still arguably the best, lost to Lamine Ouahab, ranked No.752. It was another low point in a career that too seldom ventures out of the basement. He has now climbed to the quarterfinals of the Monte Carlo Masters, the first time he has risen so high at so august a tournament. Philipp Kohlschreiber did not write the book on streakiness (it's written in French); he is merely its latest custodian. But there is good reason to think he permits Haase to borrow it from time to time. I picture the Dutchman poring over that oft-handled tome late into the night, studiously absorbing its nuances by furtive torchlight.

Haase's form is typically defined by whether his lustily-produced groundstrokes find the court or not. As with, say, James Blake or Andrei Golubev, one assumed he knows no other way to play. Today was thus a surprise. It was decidedly cool in Monte Carlo this afternoon, and damp when it wasn't flat out sodden. Soggy balls, a tin sky, and mud – it's difficult to imagine conditions that suit Haase less. They demand patience, thoughtfulness, a willingness to run, and sufficient grunt to impart work onto a leaden ball. (For all that Rafael Nadal professes to prefer a faster, bouncier surface, he certainly has the skills to excel on a day like today, as poor Mikhail Kukushkin discovered). Haase has the grunt, but it was a wonder to see him unleash those other qualities – cerebral and aerobic – in seeing off Tomaz Bellucci.

Bellucci, it must be said, did not read the conditions well, maintaining a quixotic determination to hit through the court until the very end. Nor did he reproduce yesterday's form, which allowed him to stretcher off a wounded David Ferrer. The result was 40 unforced errors, and several hundred wasted break points. Too often Bellucci would attempt an audacious winner while pushed wide or deep, but Haase was laudable in his commitment to shoving the Brazilian across and back. On a day when only two players truly excelled in bleak conditions, Haase's sustained focus counts as a minor miracle. He's back in the top fifty.

Wawrinka d. (8) Almagro, 6/3 6/3

Aside from Nadal, whose victory was so complete that even his hardcore fans must profess themselves satisfied – though some remain concerned his workout lacked sufficient intensity – the most imposing player today was Stan Wawrinka, who trounced Nicolas Almagro. Some had high hopes for Almagro this clay season, based on no clear

evidence whatsoever. True, he performed well in South America, but he long ago proved that this hardly heralds success in Europe once the big boys show up. Some suggested that he would pose the greatest threat to Nadal's inexorable progress to the final, an assertion based, again, on no evidence whatsoever, except perhaps an uneasy concern that a man who'd lost seven times in a row was due for a win.

They needn't have worried. Wawrinka today looked like the more accomplished clay-courter, and while Almagro's groundstrokes are very impressive, the superior weight the Swiss brings on both the forehand and backhand was obvious, and telling. Almagro looked blunted by the conditions, and Wawrinka did not – his backhand *reared* off the dull court. Wawrinka was also willing to close on the net, and finish points with touch. The only hiccough came at the end, with a flurry of wasted match points. He had a right to be nervous. He'll face Nadal in the quarterfinals.

(4) Tsonga d. (13) Verdasco, 7/6 6/2

(6) Berdych d. (12) Nishikori, 2/6 6/2 6/4

Nerves might have explained Fernando Verdasco's stricken capitulation to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, if not for the fact that the Spaniard has been in that position so often before, and succumbed in basically the same way every time. He held two set points in the first set tiebreak, and grew timid. On both Tsonga justified his lofty ranking. The second, which the Frenchman took with an audacious dropshot-volley combo, brought down the house. From there he took the set, and soared to a double break in the second. Kei Nishikori and Tomas Berdych breezily split a couple of sets, before getting down to brass tacks in the third. Nishikori gained a break point at 4/4, constructed a fine point, but took his eye off the ball on the crucial inside-out forehand. Berdych held, then broke, then started shouting at the sky. Nishikori knew he'd blown it on that forehand.

(9) Simon d. (7) Tipsarevic, 6/0 4/6 6/1

(3) Murray d. Benneteau, 6/5 ret.

Janko Tipsarevic blew it on every stroke, especially in the first set, in which he served at an abysmal 37%, and won only 14% of those that went in. All six games went to deuce, and his opponent, Gilles Simon, won all of them. Both players took a break from this pattern in the second, but reprised it fairly succinctly in the third. We could, I suppose, concede that Tipsarevic isn't a clay-courter. But nor is Simon. Julien Benneteau played out of his skin for ten games against Andy Murray, but was brought back to corporeality soon enough, crashing heavily to the court several times, and bugging first his ankle, then his elbow. Injury, as ever, proved a sure method of miring a soul threatening to

take flight. Murray afterwards suggested there are issues with the courts. Juan Monaco, who is out for a month, doubtless concurs.

A Picturesque Picture

Monte Carlo Masters, Semifinals

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

'It's hard to imagine a more picturesque picture than this,' remarked Chris Wilkinson on the Tennis TV feed, his verbal inspiration failing him (and us) just when he needed it most. Accompanying his words, the screen revealed a delicately graded Mediterranean sky (strangely muted to Australian eyes) dissolving away to the left in white dazzle, and falling through a fractal eternity of blues to the abrupt horizon. The sea sprawled back towards the camera, a flat plain flecked and gouged with white, lent volume by the vast pleasure yacht placed just so, and form by the tennis court in the foreground, like a swatch of burnt Sienna. This most picturesque of pictures surely deserved better.

Down on the court, the once picaresque Novak Djokovic seemed rather less impressed by the sumptuous locale. For one thing, he lives here and is doubtless used to it. For another, he could see little through the billows of dust periodically coalescing and gambolling across the court, and setting up camp in his throat and eyes. The picturesque picture hid the reality that it was a horrible day for tennis. For all television's manifold benefits – celebrity cooking shows and sitcoms about fractions of men – it isn't at its best when showing wind (although it retains an edge over poetry and ballet in this respect). It relies on images, and moving air looks more or less like still air. Those white caps and the writhing flags were a giveaway, I suppose, and the effects microphones registered a dull moan over and below the ceaseless chatter of a crowd always too slow to settle. Djokovic was put out by them as well. For days, and with reason, he's matched any environmental setback with a darkened regard. Today, by all accounts, was his grandfather's funeral.

His opponent Tomas Berdych was all business. The Czech had torn through Andy Murray yesterday with a comprehensiveness that left English commentators across three networks scrambling for explanations. His game had mostly survived the night intact, although he'd unfortunately left his first serve back in the hotel room. Five double faults in the opening set suggested he'd misplaced the second, as well. Nevertheless, Berdych still won the set. Djokovic was peevishly distracted – to his litany of squalid outrage we might add countless dodgy bounces and a patch of clay behind the landward baseline requiring mid-set maintenance. But Berdych, once the rallies got under way, was

imperious, combining patience with power and depth so potently that even the sport's best defender was frequently stranded. It was the Czech's immaculate point construction that stood out, the way his winners were a logical conclusion of each rally, and seemingly entailed little risk. Bossed around thus, Djokovic's mood soured, the wind roared dully, and the set disappeared.

The remainder of the match, once Djokovic saved breakpoints early in the second set, witnessed a gradual but accelerating reversal, apart from the gale, which never abated. Berdych's immaculate length shortened and Djokovic began to exert control. By the third set, it was all Djokovic, and Berdych's winners grew wild, and eked out from desperate positions. Even by midway through the second set, however, the intensity had drained from the match. The crowd grew restive, and the only energy came howling in from the sea. Djokovic, as is his way, bellowed with great vigour once it was over. It was an ugly match, inevitably in the conditions, but, yet again, he'd won it.

(2) Nadal d. (9) Simon, 6/3 6/4

His opponent in the final will be Rafael Nadal, who surprised no one by defeating Gilles Simon in the second semifinal, although Simon surprised everyone by playing so well. I confess that Simon is probably my least favourite player to watch, although this view would see sharp upward revision if he continues to play like he did today. Notorious for his passive, pushing game, a game predicated around fleetness of foot and junkiness of shot, Simon to his credit realised that such an approach would yield only one outcome against Nadal on clay. If Simon played 'normally' – as he had done so far this week in seeing off both Tipsarevic and Tsonga, grown men beaten to death with pillows – he would hardly last the hour: he'd be *kukushkined*.

Nadal on this court is just too dangerous. That forehand was designed and constructed for clay like Monte Carlo's, which rewards full value for spin. It helped that conditions were fast (and that the bounce was uneven). Consequently, Simon attacked, without relent and with tremendous poise. His crosscourt backhand, in particular, were taken tremendously early, smothering Nadal's vicious spin, and consistently leaving the world No.2 stranded in the backhand corner. I was astonished, and the commentary and various online media suggested I was not alone. It was as though the plodding Geoffrey Boycott became Adam Gilchrist for an afternoon. There was surely no way he could keep it up.

The wind had eased somewhat by the later match, although it remained a steady zephyr, gusting intermittently. Thus assaulted by his opponent, with uncertain conditions and a partisan crowd, Nadal's victory was a minor masterpiece of focus and footwork.

The fleetness with which he scooted into his backhand corner was outstanding. More than the forehand itself, it is the virtuosity with which he enables it that truly stands out. It is also remarkable how much more adept he is at this on clay than on hardcourts. Pundits sometimes wonder why, say, Federer doesn't simply redirect sliced backhands up the line to Nadal's backhand. The blinding speed with which Nadal backpedals around his backhand is the answer. Simon today had nothing to fear from Nadal's backhand, it was just a matter of finding it.

The turning point came early, at 3/3, when Simon moved to 15-40 on Nadal's serve: two breakpoints. The first was a muscular rally, typically for the Spaniard, if not for the Frenchman. Nadal's launched a backhand that found the line, and steeped suddenly off a bad bounce, rearing over Simon's racquet. I remarked at Indian Wells (against Nalbandian) how often Nadal finds the line when facing breakpoint. On the next point, Simon played a fine rally, and swooped in on the net, but struck the put-away volley off centre, putting it not away but smack in the middle of the court. He read Nadal's subsequent pass, but netted the makeable second volley. Nadal went on to hold. Too often players are broken after failing to break their opponent, and this especially seems to be the case for lower-ranked players when facing Nadal (which is currently everyone except Djokovic), arguably a testament to the desperation they must feel at having blown their only chance. Simon was duly broken, and Nadal held comfortably for the set.

The Spaniard opened the second with another break, capped by a whipped forehand winner up the line. He was now 2/2 on breakpoints. Simon wasn't. Nadal would coast to the match on that advantage, although they would trade unrequited breakpoints for the next few games. The wind rose again, the shadows encroached, and a final forehand winner sealed the day. It was the best I've ever seen Simon play, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't the best Nadal has played – not by any stretch – but it was enough.

Whether it will be sufficient in tomorrow's final is an entirely different question. Nadal should be pleased with his forehand and his footwork, but concerned about his returning – which had improved since yesterday, though not by much – and the tendency to leave his forehand corner unguarded. These are both areas where Djokovic, who has a better serve and crosscourt backhand than Simon, will make the Spaniard bleed. After the match Nadal remarked that 'At the end, you cannot change your game a lot, no? I don't have that talent to change a lot my game.' But these are areas he must change, if he is to staunch the flow. Tomorrow we will discover whether he can become only the second man in the Open era to claim the same event eight times, or whether Djokovic can defeat him eight times in a row, all in finals. There is much to play for. As Chris Wilkinson might say, it should be a spectacular spectacle.

An Unmatched Achievement

Monte Carlo Masters, Final

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

Rafael Nadal defeated Novak Djokovic today in a Monte Carlo final that was even more straightforward than the score line suggests, and considerably less exciting than the epoch-defining epic we'd been promised, and therefore dreaded. As a match, it was a fizzer. Even before the tournament commenced, we were told that the eventual result would give us a clear guide as to how the clay season would play out. Well, the result has eventuated, and I don't feel any wiser.

I doubt whether Nadal or his legion fans are overly concerned. Rightly, they'll take a win over a spectacle any day. That being said, the numbers themselves *are* spectacular. This was Nadal's 42nd straight victory at the MCCC, and he moves clear of Federer atop the list of all-time Masters winners, to 20. He has now won eight consecutive titles here, an achievement that may go unmatched in our lifetime, although he'll very likely augment it in years to come. Nadal winning Monte Carlo is coming to feel eternal. If there's any justice, the Centre Court will be renamed in his honour. If he wins again next year – lucky number nine – he'll finally be allowed to kiss Princess Charlene. Something to strive for. Djokovic was permitted to give her a peck even in defeat, because he's a resident, and that's apparently the rule, which I think is pretty generous of Prince Albert. It was surely the highlight of Djokovic's afternoon.

He certainly didn't do anything memorable on the tennis court, aside from spraying a heroic 25 unforced errors and failing to hold serve in the entire second set. Errors against Tomas Berdych yesterday inspired broken racquets. Today's mistakes produced nothing more flamboyant than a wry grimace. Afterwards, on the podium, he was relaxed and chatty. I can't recall anyone looking less put out after receiving a hiding from his closest rival.

For those keen to debate it, the debate to have is whether Djokovic could have won had he played better, or whether the hiding would merely have been less comprehensive. It was Nadal's finest match since last year's clay season, which is when he last won a title. The most remarkable aspect of it was how assiduously he eschewed his usual patterns, and yet maintained iron control. He and Uncle Toni had clearly devised a game plan, one that went deeper than just landing a lot of first serves, although he did that, too. Unpredictability was the key. There were very few of those three-forehand sequences that Nadal uses to open up the court. Instead he often drove the strong off-forehand

immediately, and Djokovic was sent scurrying. Halfway through the first set, the Serb began to guess, early and incorrectly. Nadal served heavily at Djokovic's forehand, which leaked errors. At one point he hit three body serves in a row, and the world No.1 picked none of them. There was a fabulous running backhand up the line, some excellent drop shots, and, most importantly, a courageous willingness to return with greater depth. And nearly all his mishits landed in. It was a good day.

And yet, it wasn't as though Djokovic was always off-balance. Plenty of times – 25 of them, in fact – he missed perfectly simple groundstrokes, mostly on the backhand, and mostly long. The wind was a factor, and so was the opponent, but it wasn't everything. There was something else, a kind of numb disconnection. The temptation for too many people has been to invoke the loss of Djokovic's grandfather midweek. Undeniably it played a part, but no one is qualified to say which part, however, and no one should try to. Of course, this did not excuse too many from attempting precisely that, from weaving the death of Vladimir Djokovic into the extravagant pre-match hype. Sadly no loss is so great that it cannot be traduced, and re-spun into a convenient narrative of redemption: 'Do it for Grandpa'. Djokovic afterwards didn't look or sound like he'd let down anyone, even himself.

The rest of the hype rightly centred on Nadal. By now everyone knows the numbers, although this didn't forestall constant reiteration as the week ploughed on from sunshine through rain into wind, and the Nadal-Djokovic final blossomed from figurative into actual inevitability. Could the Mallorcan claim an eighth Monte Carlo title, and avoid an eighth consecutive final loss to the world No.1? It turns out he can.

With so much going on, today's final is therefore a difficult one to parse properly, although not as difficult as the allegedly expert analysts on the Sky Sports coverage made it seem. It was still possible to do it wrong. Boris Becker went on at tedious length about Djokovic's efforts to step up onto the baseline several years ago, apparently because this was the first thing that came into Becker's head and he was being paid either way. Greg Rusedski declared with unfeigned awe that this was the first bad match the Serb had played since he gained the No.1 ranking, apparently forgetting Djokovic's sorry showing in Dubai. (And we *know* Rusedski saw that one: his disciples may cast their minds back to Miami, when he astutely chalked Djokovic's loss up to Dubai's excessive altitude.) At the risk of sounding like a tennis nerd, there was also Kei Nishikori in Basel, and David Ferrer at the Tour Finals. Peter Fleming was invited to speculate on what was going on in Novak's head. To his credit, he begged off. They were unanimous on Nadal, though. He was just tops.

Opinion elsewhere has bifurcated sharply over what today's result signifies for the clay season's remainder. As a rule, I am slow to assign meaning to these things. Sometimes a tennis match is actually just a tennis match. Clearly others feel differently. Some insist that Djokovic's domination of Nadal is at an end. Nick Lester, signing off on Tennis TV, demonstrated that even metaphors would not endure the new order intact: 'Rafa has broken the mould . . . that Djokovic had over him.' Others have been more circumspect, taking their lead from Djokovic, who didn't appear particularly ruffled. Today's result means nothing, they insist: the real tests will come in Madrid, or Rome, or Paris.

Come what may, today the real test was in Monte Carlo. For the eighth time in as many years, Nadal passed it. For whatever reason, Djokovic didn't, but then he never has. I don't know what to make of that. If everything is just the same, then what has really changed?

A Mild Hangover

The week following Monte Carlo always feels like a small hangover after a modest bender, the queasy Saturday morning you spend lining your stomach with bacon and eggs ahead of the planned Bacchanal that night. We'll all be riotously drunk on clay soon enough. Rafael Nadal's latest trophy feast at the MCCC has been duly digested – exultantly or wearily depending on one's constitution – and his inevitable victory in Barcelona is still days away; a curious echo, or a short satisfied belch. The presiding genies have thoughtfully bulldozed his draw, smoothing any stray bumps on the path before him. These bumps initially took the forms of Tomaz Bellucci and Tomas Berdych. Both are now unrecognisably mangled, and have been carted away.

Barcelona, First Round

(11) Raonic d. Falla, 6/4 7/6

The ATP website has commemorated Milos Raonic's first round win over Alejandro Falla with typical literary panache, running the by-lines 'Good step forward' and 'My serve was key.' Amazing. On that note, they recently promoted a profile of Matt Ebden with the revelation that 'I've made good progress'. While I'll concede that neither of these guys is an aphorist on par with, say, George Bernard Shaw or Roger Rasheed, the ATP needs to work harder to help them sound less like cavemen.

Nevertheless, it was a decent match, and no one can say that Raonic was wrong: his serve was, without question, key. Falla, whose leg was taped so comprehensively that he initially resembled a swarthy Phillip Petzschnr, toiled with great heart. He produced

some tremendous passing shots. One running forehand, had it been struck by Nadal or Federer, would have featured in YouTube compilations for years to come. But it wasn't, so it won't.

Bucharest, First Round

Malisse d. Dimitrov, 6/4 6/2

Someone will undoubtedly win the mercifully rescheduled BRD Nastase Tiriac Trophy in Bucharest. Based on current form it won't be the defending champion Florian Mayer, which is a shame. Nor will it be Grigor Dimitrov, who has already fallen to Xavier Malisse. Flash forward a decade, and imagine the Bulgarian's careworn face: that ingravescent brow, and those tired eyes, still searching for that breakthrough win. Or flash back a decade, and picture the Belgian: gaze dew-laden with hope, calm with the knowledge that a trip to the Wimbledon semifinals guarantees big things to come. Sometimes, all the talent in the world isn't enough. For a match so fraught with perspective and portent, today's was mostly without incident, until the end, when character became density. Thus weighed down, Malisse blew a 5/2 lead, and a few match points. Dimitrov blew a break point in the final game, utterly duffing a simple return. I wasn't as exciting as it sounds.

Elsewhere

Flash back just a year, and the week following Monte Carlo was dominated by the Spanish tennis federation's set-to with the USTA over the surface for the Davis Cup quarterfinals in Austin, which they insisted was illegally fashioned from oiled glass. It was a complete non-story – which later became farcical when Spain took the tie easily on the allegedly unplayable court – but this is the kind of week for that kind of thing. Thankfully this week has produced actual news. As expected, the San Jose 250 event has been relocated to Texas. Concerns that this will cruelly overload the already inadequate facilities at the Racquet Club of Memphis have been allayed by the decision to sell the Memphis 500 to IMG, and haul it off to Rio de Janeiro. Those who were worried that IMG has too little say in tennis, and that they don't own enough stuff, can rest easy for the moment.

This will mean that the so-called Golden Swing – or as I prefer it, the *Nicolas Almagro False Hope Parade* – will boast two 500 level events. It will also mean that the United States only has one. I'm satisfied with both of these outcomes, although the USTA, justifiably given their mandate, isn't overly thrilled. Apparently they've written a letter. But Memphis, honestly, was a dud 500, and invariably served up a far more malnourished field than the concurrently run 250 in Marseilles. The USTA has expressed

fears that US players will now venture abroad in the lead-up to Indian Wells. Even if Mardy Fish's disastrous adventure in Marseilles wasn't a salutary warning to his compatriots, Monte Carlo last week proved just how realistic the USTA's fears aren't. There was one American in the main draw, and none in qualifying. However, that lone American was Donald Young, who was dealt with severely. Hopefully he has learned his lesson, and that it is a lesson to others.

Update: The lesson has indeed been learned. Mardy Fish's aversion to leaving the States has grown so consuming that he has opted to skip the Olympics, and play Washington instead. Lleyton Hewitt controversially did the same in 2004, and went on to win Washington and Long Island against piss-weak fields, before running to the US Open final without dropping a set. Then, famously, he was destroyed by Federer 6/0 7/6 6/0.

One Enchanted Evening

Barcelona and Bucharest, Second and Third Rounds

There was good tennis to be had today in Barcelona, Bucharest and elsewhere, although having spent frustrating hours in the fruitless pursuit of it, my firsthand knowledge is limited. Nevertheless, I discovered vestiges everywhere, traces evident in still-restive crowds and the detritus of tightly fought tiebreaks. Yet whenever I felt myself growing near, the trail went cold. We've all had night's like these, when everyone just wants to go home to bed, but you all stay out anyway, desperately searching for a good time, until, by 4.30am, you're barely surviving an unsolicited lap-dance from a hirsute West Papuan highlander.

The upset of the round was Milos Raonic's straight sets rumbling of Nicolas Almagro, which I tuned into just in time to see the Canadian gathering up his things from the Pista Central, under the watchful gaze of that rakishly-tilted Volkswagen, perched at one end of the court. It had, apparently, been a mighty effort by the Canadian, against an eternally disappointing opponent who may or not have been injured.

Wasting only a few moments on the usual uneasy contemplation of Raonic's strange proportions and alarming resemblance to Moe Szyslak, I switched streams for Bucharest, where my dark-horse pick Cedrik-Marcel Stebe was emphatically failing to trouble Andreas Seppi, in spite of the latter's superior ranking and far greater experience. Stebe has yet to claim consecutive wins on the tour this year, but his time will come. Then watch out. There will be consecutive wins all over the place.

I remained in Romania for the nonce, a deft change of courts delivering me to the expert embrace of Fabio Fognini, who had thoughtfully coordinated his outfit with his opponent Marcos Baghdatis, and then spotted the Cypriot a break in the opening set, before roaring back to take it 7/5. It was thrilling, apparently. The Fog was fearless, the way Baghdatis used to be. There were allegedly *torrents* of winners. I saw none of it. They were well into the second set by the time I happened along, and the winners, sadly, had slowed to a fitful trickle. Eventually the players arrived at the point of the set where double faults become crucial. Every game saw one or the other play come within two points of the set or the match.

A tip off on Twitter suggested that Kei Nishikori and Albert Ramos were doing good things. With little reluctance, I tore myself away from Bucharest, and returned to Barcelona. Either the lead was dud - a mislead - or the protagonists had worked the initial excitement out of their systems. Nishikori was up a set and break. This of course is not an impregnable position, and so Nishikori set about fortifying it, ever so slowly, with an additional break. Ramos was mostly powerless to stop him.

I'd committed a tactical error. Back in Bucharest, Fognini apparently finished off Baghdatis with a tremendous tiebreak, belting winners everywhere. It must have been something to see. Anything would have been something to see. It all became a bit of a blur by that point, the way all good benders tend to once the witching hour arrives. Somehow I found myself in Taiwan, watching the Kaohsiung Challenger. My mouth felt carpeted. Amir Weintraub was facing the top seed Yen-Hsun Lu, and acquitting himself admirably, insofar as his error quota, though large, barely exceeded his opponent's. After the extended clay rallies, these quick-fire hardcourt points were startlingly brief. I momentarily perked up. Points were concluded after they'd barely begun, mostly when the returner's shot landed beyond the confines of the court. Lu took the first set, but I fancied Weintraub's chances. I hadn't watched him since qualifying at the Australian Open, and he was playing better than that. He lost.

A return to Barcelona revealed Andy Murray thrashing Santiago Giraldo. There is often a great deal of pleasure to be gained from watching a top player dish out a hiding to a lesser one, but Murray can be relied upon to provide the exception. It was as dull as a 6/1 6/2 result can be. Still, it was a pleasure to have Jason Goodall back in the commentary box. Afterwards Ivan Lendl was invited down on to the court, and strove mightily to deliver clichés through the PA system's excessive reverberation: 'Andy-dy-dy is taking-ing-ing it one match-atch-atch at a time-ime-ime.' As a two-time former champion, and a reigning Ivan Lendl, he was presented with a plaque. Albert Costa was

there, as well, glowering under the presiding gaze of that impassive Volkswagen: *Aus Liebe zum Automobile*.

I tarried in Barcelona, now fit for naught but torpid staring. The court was slowly rotating clockwise. Feliciano Lopez beat Jarkko Nieminen handily. The Spanish commentators, whose smug bonhomie had grown muted following Almagro's upset, were back in full song. And with good reason: Rafael Nadal was up next, his stately procession to the title scheduled to continue. But it's only stately because they insist on making him wait a day in between matches. The whole thing would be over much sooner if they allowed him to play all five matches consecutively. Today's victim was Robert Farah, a Columbian ranked somewhere in the 240s. Goodall declared Farah to be a doubles specialist, and I suppose, compared to singles, he is. This was the pair's first meeting. It is a contractual obligation for players and their fans to overstate the degree of difficulty that facing an opponent for the first time entails. But I can't imagine how unusual a new player's game would have to be for it to trouble Nadal on clay. Safin's power, combined with Raonic's serve and Santoro's finesse? There's a reason guys with those attributes aren't ranked No.242.

Having said all of that, Farah won't be ranked there for long. His results this week alone will propel him up to No.208. He is also a decent player, and based on today's effort it isn't any stretch to see how he beat Pablo Andujar in the previous round. He has power to burn on the first serve, and a fine backhand. He pressed Nadal closely at times today, and even broke him at the start of the second set. Nadal, naturally, hit some excellent forehands, especially on the run, and especially passes.

It was now very late, and through the haze I noted the burly Papuan in the corner eyeing me off worryingly. Fernando Verdasco and David Ferrer won easily, although in my final desperation I'd already fled back to Bucharest, figuring that nothing untoward could befall me in the former Eastern Bloc. Gilles Simon was handling Dudi Sela with ease. Gratifyingly, he has retained the assertive style he unleashed on Nadal in the Monte Carlo semifinals. Unfortunately for Sela, this meant losing rapidly, rather than eventually, which is Simon's traditional timeframe. Still, it wasn't enough to save my evening. As the Papuan's weight descended onto my legs, I felt myself go under.

Meaning the World

Barcelona, Semifinals

The top seeds have moved through to their respective finals in both Bucharest and Barcelona, following a day of straight-sets semifinals, only one of which inspired much beyond yawns and dyspepsia. These have thrown up – or vomited forth – a pair of deciders that will pit an overwhelming favourite against a sentimental one. As a way of settling an uneven week, it is as much as one could have hoped for.

(1) Nadal d. (9) Verdasco, 6/0 6/4

The result and the duration of any Nadal-Verdasco clash are wholly predicated on how much better Nadal is at everything on that particular day. Since we're dealing with people, this is a variable metric. Sometimes, like today, Nadal is much better, and the result is a blow-out. Since we're dealing with Verdasco, we can assume that even when it is close, the result remains largely foregone. Verdasco will always find a way, and usually he will find it via the double-fault. In this area, he remains a virtuoso of the first order, like Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, who elevated the performance of Debussy to unparalleled heights with his precision and artistry, where others had merely contented themselves with sloppy gush. Such is Verdasco's mastery of the double-fault, that even when they don't prove decisive – and today the decisive moments were dispensed with in the first three games – they maintain an indirect influence on his performance.

The serve is the only area in which Verdasco is putatively superior to Nadal. And yet, haunted by the spectres of double-faults past, Verdasco has lately taken to meekly rolling his first delivery in. It proved disastrous in Monte Carlo, when it cost him multiple set points, and perhaps the match, against Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. Today, faced with an opponent he hasn't beaten in 674 attempts, it was probably never going to matter much, but it would have helped avoid the humiliation of a first set in which he won ten points, and not enough of them consecutively to claim an entire game. Nadal was devastating, but Verdasco was too willing to allow it.

Verdasco rapidly conceded a break in the second set. Then, figuring it no longer mattered much either way, he started to go after his serve, which allowed him to step in on his forehand. It turns out those one-two combos everyone goes on about don't only work in theory. When Verdasco has time to move forward onto the ball, his left-handed forehand is the equal of Nadal's, which is not the same thing as saying his forehand is as good a shot overall. Nadal's remains potent from any position, and for almost any purpose. There was a minor wobble at the end, when Verdasco threatened to break back

as Nadal served for it. It was a tricky spot for Verdasco to extricate himself from, since he was returning and therefore couldn't rely on his second serve to save or damn him. But even artists have solid fundamentals. He found some groundstroke errors when he needed them most, missed a few returns, and tracked down a drop shot from Nadal, flicking it casually wide.

(3) Ferrer d. (11) Raonic, 7/6 7/6

David Ferrer has said that winning Barcelona title would be the climax of his career. Of course, players say this sort of thing all the time. Over in Bucharest, Gilles Simon has presumably prepared a victory speech in which he extols the virtues of the Nastase-Tiriac Trophy unstintingly. Initially, I dismissed Ferrer's words as more of the same. After all, he is a near-permanent fixture in the top ten, and has tarried at the top of the men's game for half a decade. Yet, of course, he has never won a Masters 1000, or ventured beyond the semifinals at a Major. This is not secret knowledge, and I have written several times about how utterly the top four control the Masters and Slams. It is, as the hopefully inimitable Donald Rumsfeld might say, a known known. And yet, for whatever reason, I was slow to realise that Barcelona would indeed constitute the biggest title of Ferrer's career, for all that he has an entire orchard of those pear things from Acapulco. A prestigious and richly-traditioned 500 in Spain, which many Nadal fans would prefer to see their idol skip, really would mean the world to the world No.6.

This might explain Ferrer's reaction upon sealing a straight sets victory over Milos Raonic today, as he collapsed to his back on the clay. It's true that both sets were tiebreakers, but Ferrer was unflappable in both of those, especially in the first, when he flew to a 6-0 lead. This had been a colossal shame, since it capped an excellent and dramatic first set, in which neither player could convert multiple break points. Through the early going, Raonic was as savage on serve as he had been against Almagro and Murray, and his off forehand remained nearly as irresistible. Ferrer, apparently more astute than Murray, directed almost everything to the Canadian's backhand. Having dropped the first set, there was an entirely justified fear that Raonic would fall away sharply in the second, and to be frank his level was reduced, and yet it is to his credit that he remained with Ferrer until a second tiebreak. He saved one match point with an inside-in forehand winner, but not the second, and Ferrer hit the dirt.

In the final Ferrer will face Nadal, which means that he will, sadly, lose. He has beaten Nadal four times in official competition, twice at Majors, and even once on clay. Aside from Murray, elite athletes are experts at extracting the positive aspect out of any situation, reducing it to a condensed paste, and then consuming it for sustenance. Yet

even Ferrer will derive scant nourishment from the consideration that his only clay victory came eight years ago, in Stuttgart, and that it was still 7/5 in the third. Nadal has since won Barcelona six times, which is every time he's shown up since 2005. Ferrer lost to him in the final last year, and in 2009 and 2008. You can't sustain yourself on that.

Getting to the final is not an inconsiderable achievement, and Ferrer was probably justified in rolling about on the court afterwards. He has come a long way. But in the grand scheme of taking the Barcelona title from Nadal, he has barely done more than arrive at the venue.

But anything can happen in sport.

The Phantom Climax

Barcelona, Final

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

Having never won a prestigious tennis tournament multiple times, or even once, I cannot say whether the seventh triumph feels less or more special than the fourth or fifth. Looking at Rafael Nadal and David Ferrer at today's trophy presentation at the Barcelona Open Banc Sabadell, I could not shake off the certainty that whatever seven meant, one would have meant a whole lot more. Nadal was clearly thrilled, but I suspect he would have looked at least as delighted if his friend had won instead. Certainly Ferrer would have been happier. By his own admission, winning Barcelona would have been the climax of his career (which tells you just how passé the Davis Cup has grown for these particular Spaniards). Of course, he didn't win, and the phantom of that climax haunted proceedings.

Nadal was effusive in claiming the Barcelona trophy had never tasted better: 'The emotions are always high, but probably each year they get a bit higher as you are one year older and you don't know how many chances you are going to have left'. For the record, he is 25, which even for a tennis player is a little premature for intimations of mortality, especially for one who has just won consecutive tournaments without dropping a set. Assuming his knees maintain some structural integrity, his main danger in years to come will be a collapsing shelf in his trophy room. If the shelf holding seven Conde Godó trophies gave way, even Atlas would buckle. And let's not forget he won Queens as well. That trophy is titanic.

Others were undoubtedly more emotionally invested in the match than I was, and therefore have a different take on it, but even as Ferrer stepped up to serve for the second set I don't recall my faith in Nadal's eventual victory wavering. This isn't to say that the final wasn't exciting. It was, although its strange energy derived mostly from wondering how long Ferrer could sustain his stratospheric level, and then marvelling when he kept it up longer than seemed possible. He cavorted along a tightrope for hours, but, aside from those Nadal fans with the hardest cores, it was surely inevitable that he would slip eventually. Nevertheless, frenzied supposition has thickened the ether. What if Ferrer had taken any one of the handful of set points at 6/5 in the first set? What if he'd served out the second? We can say that the match was close, and it was, but should not therefore infer that Ferrer was close to winning it. Five times he was a point away from taking the first set. Winning a set goes a long way towards winning two of them, which goes most if not all of the way towards winning a match, and climaxing for real. But winning a set is also necessary for losing in three. I'm wearily convinced that's what would have happened. Others may have different views. But it was a straight sets victory for Nadal, and once he had broken back (to love) at the end of the second set, he grew, typically, into a titan.

Ferrer had led in every one of the first dozen or so games, and opened the match by breaking for 2/0, but at nearly every decisive point thereafter, Nadal was superior, and often fearless. Ferrer hammered the Mallorcan's backhand all day, but on those set points he could hardly find it. Nadal landed first serves (one was an ace), and belted forehands (although he also wrapped his frame around a backhand that wobbled in). In the tiebreak, Ferrer stumbled, and suddenly Nadal's forehand asserted itself once more. Nadal's level dropped in the second set, as it has all week, and Ferrer took four straight games. He stepped up to serve for the set. Again, when it mattered, Nadal went big, broke to love, and then stayed that way.

Interviewed afterwards, Ferrer choked on tears. He knew he'd played superbly, but not when it mattered most. Against Nadal, he admitted, you cannot just play well. You have to play perfectly, and you have to do it when it counts. His lost eyes looked like those of a fine player who had deliberately aimed low for his career's climax, and who now realises he might have aimed too high.

The Flurrying Fog

Bucharest, Final

(1) Simon d. Fognini, 6/4 6/3

Fabio Fognini, in his first tour final, fell to Gilles Simon in the final of the Nastase-Tiriac Trophy in Bucharest. For Simon, it is his tenth career title, three of which have come at this event. As a match, it played out almost precisely as one would expect. Simon steadily smothered the mercurial Italian, whose flashes of brilliance joined up initially to form a blinding light, before eventually breaking apart into fitful sparks, and then going dark entirely.

Fognini – The Fog – typically began in a flurry. Except that fog doesn't flurry. One's eagerness to pun on 'fog' is as ever vitiated by the Italian's quicksilver approach to the sport, which is by turns thrilling, irritating and engaging, generally within a single point. As metaphorical classes, there is just no overlap. As a writer, it's frustrating, though I suppose this is an apt testament to watching him play. It turns out that parsing sentences about him is about as tough as deciphering his matches.

Fognini's fans – and his broad appeal is such that these are not demarcated by national boundaries – seem generally eager to proclaim his utter uniqueness. I will thus court opprobrium by suggesting that he is a very similar player to Xavier Malisse, in his indisputable talent, his capacity to impart pace from nowhere, his instinctive court-craft, his ease in the forecourt, and his tendency to alternate breathtaking winners with clearly not giving a toss. The key differences, for the collector of trading cards, is that Fognini generates drama more effortlessly – Malisse is always strained in this regard – and that he is far more handsome. It could be that I am biased in this area, since Fognini and I currently cultivate a similar facial hair arrangement – sometimes referred to as a 'beard' – although I will concede that he executes it rather more successfully.

As Ferrer would later, the Flurrying Fog shot out to an early break. Unpack that sentence at your peril. It seemed as though every rally ended in a winner, and that every one of them was different. Simon, beset, looked set upon, although he often does for some reason. Indeed, I am always surprised to see Simon exhibit so much passion in between points, and then dismayed that so little of it finds its way into his actual tennis. It is especially strange when he plays someone like Fognini or, say, Alex Dolgoplov, and they're running hot and cold. Simon will push one ball airily up the middle of the court, and his opponent will loft it over the baseline. He'll do the same again, and his opponent will smack a winner, whereupon Simon will turn and lavish some invective on his player's

box. What does he think will happen? Does he believe that no one can possibly tee off on his mighty groundstrokes? His entire approach is surely based on the awareness that anyone can belt his shots away into the corners, but that they cannot keep it up indefinitely. Eventually the opponent will commit an error or drop it short. Simon is admirably patient in waiting for these opportunities. But why, then, does he lose his cool so constantly? It could be that there are factors at play too subtle for me to grasp. It could just be that he's a human being.

Sadly, it didn't take long before Fognini's winners stopped finding the corners, and began to miss the court (thereby disqualifying themselves), although enough of them didn't that he remained level with Simon for a while. The tennis was delightfully all-court, as extravagant lobs gave way to deft volleys, and scything backhands, but it wasn't quite enough to save a tight first set. There was a realistic fear that Fognini would fall away entirely upon losing that opening set, although, typically iconoclastic, he saved his collapse until the middle of the second. He dropped serve for 4/2, and from there appeared to lose interest. One may posit any number of explanations, but there's no reason to think they'd be correct. Perhaps he'd just had enough. It was only his maiden final, after all. There will be others, and he really didn't seem that upset.

Nothing To Be Done

Munich, First Round

(Q) Farah d. (7) Davydenko, 6/3 6/2

Defending champion Nikolay Davydenko yesterday lost to Robert Farah, the Columbian qualifier who last week tore lustily into the Barcelona main draw, and now looks capable of doing the same in Munich. The score, the stat that matters most, here ably tells the tale of a match that wasn't even close. By losing so early, Davydenko has jettisoned enough points that he'll float beyond the top fifty. Those faithful fans on earth still waiting for Davydenko would do better to search for him in orbit.

He has just become a father for the first time, and so there's a good chance he is floating ecstatically, although it will be the haggard ecstasy that nothing before parenthood quite prepares you for. Thus distracted and encumbered, the chances of Davydenko returning to the truly elite levels of the sport are fading by the week. Soon he will be compelled to qualify for Masters events, a requirement I doubt he will be thrilled at. A little over two years ago there was a widespread belief that he was destined to win a Major. Then a second set implosion against Federer at the 2010 Australian Open – it's rare to be able to isolate the precise moment when an elite career ostensibly

ends – followed by a seemingly innocuous wrist injury sent him into a slump that, somehow, he never recovered from. Once he had returned to the tour, the long wait began for him to return to his previous level. Over the last year that has given way to the hope that he would achieve one last impressive run at a significant event. Now even this looks unlikely. For a very fine player who never received his due, this is a crying shame.

Courtesy of his heroics in Barcelona last week, David Ferrer has been much discussed of late, thereby inspiring interested parties to grow profligate with the term 'dogged', and to celebrate endlessly just how exhaustively he has maximised his talents. I realise I'm courting rancour by saying so, but I'd hazard that Davydenko eclipses even Ferrer in this latter quality. The Spaniard isn't tall, but he is solidly built for all of that, and yet we're quick to excuse his lack of power, for all that he's two barely inches shorter than Andre Agassi (who was never accused of being a lightweight) and the same height as Sebastien Grosjean, whose slapped forehand up the line was rightly feared. Ferrer is also only an inch shorter than the ultra-aggressive Davydenko, who is built like a whippet.

Agassi's name is not an inappropriate one to invoke. Not since the Las Vegas retired have we witnessed a player so adroit at taking every ball on the rise, when it is still replete with energy, and then redirecting it at will and at pace. His hands, feet, and endeavour are the foundations of his game. A truly attacking player can hit him off the court – his record against Federer is abysmal – but he refuses to be intimidated by anyone. He boasts a 6-4 head-to-head with Nadal, and three of those losses came on clay. Along with Agassi, Davydenko ranks with the most finely calibrated ball-strikers I have ever seen, and amongst the most fearless.

If everyone with a heart dearly hopes that Ferrer wins a Masters title before he retires, it is worth remembering that Davydenko has won three of them (Paris, Miami and Shanghai), and that he overcame Nadal in the final twice. His crowning achievement came at the World Tour Finals in 2009, when he defeated Federer, Nadal, Soderling and del Potro to take the title, driving the giant Argentinean halfway to despair in the final.⁶

It all seems like a distant memory now. Over the last 52 weeks, Davydenko has compiled a record of 20-23. They aren't numbers to be proud of, but exceeding even the volume of those losses is their manner. Six of those losses have come to qualifiers, two to wildcards, and one to Viktor Troicki.

⁶ Perhaps most shockingly, he defeated Monfils, Soderling and Verdasco on his way to the Kuala Lumpur title earlier that year. The draw also included Ferrer, Gasquet, Gonzalez and Berdych. It was only two and half years ago, but the Malaysian Open's glory days feel as distant as Davydenko's.

A key issue here is the first serve. Despite his modest stature, Davydenko at his best boasted an insidiously tricky first ball, courtesy of a strange torque in his action. I can find no useful stats on his service speed lately, but the perception is widespread that he is going after it less. The numbers that *are* available back this up. In his best years, which were 2005 – 2009, his first serve percentage was a respectable 67-69%. This has actually *risen* in recent years (to over 70% last year). Yet, his ace rate has more than halved. In his glory years, on average 5.5% of his first serves were aces, which is not amazing in the scheme of things - Isner comes in at 16.7% - but is okay for his type of game. In the last year that has been reduced to just 2.3%. The implication is either that Davydenko has only played guys who are harder to ace, or, more likely, that he has indeed dialled back the heat on his first serve. This helps explain why he's winning so many fewer points behind it (about 6-7% lower than his peak years).

Without his serve to set up points, the widening cracks in Davydenko's ground game have grown broad enough to swallow him up. I was courtside for his squalid loss to Flavio Cipolla in the first round of the Australian Open this year, and a painful experience it was, savagely hot, windy and depressing. Cipolla's game is built around reasonable foot-speed and a slice backhand, carefully placed atop a large mound of *nothing else*. He is the kind of player that Davydenko would once beat left-handed, for a lark. Time and again the Russian would attack, achieve the ball he wanted, and then miss the putaway. He wasn't pleased about it, but he mostly just looked nonplussed, gesturing away at his brother Eduardo with an expansiveness and regularity befitting the WTA. For a game that was based around such delicate calibration, it doesn't have to go off much before it doesn't work at all. The last two sets weren't even competitive.

Today in Munich Tommy Haas was immaculate in seeing off the top seed Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. Haas insists that he has no great designs on a late career miracle, and it's easy enough to believe him. He plays on because he loves the sport, and for moments like these, in the full awareness that when it's finally over it will be over for ever. Even as an admirer of Davydenko's game, and his sly, wry attitude, I would never suggest that the Russian loves the sport that much, or enough to continue on once it becomes perpetually frustrating, once he glances around, and finally remarks, 'No, it's not worthwhile now.'

Luck of the Draw: Madrid 2012

Andy Murray has withdrawn from the Madrid Masters, citing a back strain. My vague surprise at reading this news was quickly superseded by the stunned realisation that the report had somehow failed to mention that the event is to be conducted on blue clay, and that Rafael Nadal doesn't much care for it. This report is thus sufficiently unique as

to be a collector's item, treasured for its rare flaw, like that early Spiderman comic in which the hero develops Tourette syndrome. This oversight was soon corrected by the almost impossibly interesting news that Nadal has now had a hit on the court, and still doesn't like it. Indeed, his litany of gripes has only grown. Novak Djokovic said the court plays lower on slices.

I was already tired of hearing about the blue courts some time ago. I've now progressed to a place beyond exhaustion, since everyone wants to joke about them, which would be fine if nearly everyone wasn't considerably less funny than they realise. One player's putatively wry query as to whether she was looking at tennis courts or swimming pools might have amused even slightly if a) they didn't look exactly like tennis courts, and b) there weren't already several higher profile tournaments to show us what blue tennis courts look like. The unamusing passing comment that the courts are 'smurf-coloured' was not allowed to pass without being detained indefinitely, and then molested. It has now spawned a hash-tag, and, dully rehashed the world over, has failed to develop at all. The dead horse was removed some time ago, and now people are just thrashing the ground where it lay.

The only upside to this deafening blue noise is that, unlike last year, we don't have to hear endlessly about Madrid's allegedly excessive altitude (since the Caja Magica is apparently in low orbit over La Paz). Somehow, the same pair who contested last year's Madrid final fought out the Rome final a week later, at sea level, on 'traditional' clay. If these changes have no discernible impact on the results, then what exactly is the issue? Roland Garros is weeks away. Chennai doesn't play much like Melbourne, Tokyo is quicker than Shanghai, and Basel and Valencia, in addition to being blue are utterly different speeds from each other, and from Bercy the week after, which itself varies wildly from year to year. The point is players adapt. Nadal will probably still win the French Open, and if he doesn't, it won't have anything to do with the Madrid Masters.

Nadal is frankly a pretty good chance to win Madrid, anyway. He will almost certainly reach the final. The immediate upshot of Murray's withdrawal is that world No.5 Jo-Wilfried Tsonga assumes the fourth seeding. On grass or even a hardcourt this wouldn't raise any eyebrows. But the Frenchman has spent weeks laboriously demonstrating his shortcomings on clay, to my satisfaction if no one else's. As top seed in Munich this week he lost his opening match to a resurgent Tommy Haas. In Monte Carlo he fell dismally to Gilles Simon. Before that he lost to John Isner in the Davis Cup. None of these losses are shameful, since they were all to capable players, but in none of them did Tsonga look like the fifth best player in the world. The primary reason for this is that, on clay, he

isn't, by a long way. As a potential semifinal opponent, drawing Tsonga is certainly more desirable than drawing Federer, even for Nadal, who has proven himself against both.

As in Monte Carlo, where Federer was absent, Nadal is drawn to face Tsonga in the last four. As in Monte Carlo, there is no good reason to think that match will occur. Novak Djokovic thus shares a half with Federer, who frankly has a bastard of a draw. Federer, who hasn't played in over a month, must first face the winner of Nalbandian and Raonic, which could only be more unsavoury if he had to face both consecutively, or simultaneously. Bellucci or Gasquet in the next round should be interesting, followed by a likely quarterfinal with David Ferrer. Ferrer's path to the quarterfinal appears straightforward, with only Almagro providing much to worry about, and then only for Almagro himself.

Djokovic opens against the winner of an intriguing first round tussle between Qualifier and Qualifier. I'm pencilling Qualifier in for that one, although I don't see him (or her) troubling the world No.1 after that. No one else in Djokovic's quarter should provide too stern a challenge, with the next highest seed being Janko Tipsarevic, who makes Tsonga look like Gustavo Kuerten on *terre battue*, even when it is a controversial *bleu*. Gilles Simon will arguably, and ironically, constitute Djokovic's biggest hurdle. Simon, incidentally, faces Fabio Fognini in the first round, a repeat of last week's Bucharest final, which The Fog followed up on by losing in the first round in Belgrade.

All of which brings me to the question of who will win. The cynical answer is Ion Tiriac.

A Subjective Area

Munich, Final

(4) Kohlschreiber d. (3) Cilic, 7/6 6/4

The theme of the week in Munich was flashy one-handed backhands launching winners up the line – there's an opportunity for a logo redesign – counterpointed by Marin Cilic's inexorable progress to the final. It is unfair to say that Cilic is one-dimensional, since no player truly is, but he certainly has fewer dimensions than the players he'd seen off so far. But when your primary dimension is hitting the ball flat and hard to parts of court where your opponent isn't, variety is a mere vanity, and wholly superfluous. The real problems come when your flat, hard balls stop landing in the court.

Perhaps it is my age - which is not excessive, though sufficient that I came to tennis in the 1980s - but I have always been drawn to the single-handed backhand. I regard it as

the most human of all tennis strokes, not least in the way its near-endless fallibility gives way, in the hands of its mightiest proponents, to a majestic if fleeting perfection. To watch Gustavo Kuerten's sustained backhand assault in the 2000 Masters Cup final is to be vouchsafed a glimpse of the best the sport can offer. It is surely no coincidence that most of my favourite players are streaky, and that most of them have a single-handed backhand. Thinking on it, I'd say their streakiness is inextricably tied up with their backhands. When they're on, they're close to unplayable, and the flaws inherent in the one-handed grip seem to melt away, or even to become strengths. One of them – Jo-Wilfried Tsonga – has a merely pedestrian double-fister, but has lately incorporated a wholly gratuitous single-handed passing shot into his repertoire, the only purpose of which is apparently to heighten the spectacle. This reveals the stroke's essence. A flashing backhand pass *is* a sight to behold. Federer's flicked passing shots are prodigies of wrist and timing, eliciting roars from crowds and hysteria from Robbie Koenig, yet when Hewitt or Djokovic do it with two hands we barely cock an eyebrow. Everybody *knows* the double-fister is a more solid shot, that the extra hand yields greater forgiveness on timing, more consistency on returns and when changing direction, and superior strength above the shoulders. Functionally, it's just a better shot.

And yet it seems to me that what beauty is inherent in even the greatest double-hander is inseparable from the perfection of its engineering. Meanwhile, the one-hander has a built-in flourish via the follow-through, coiled menace in the preparation, and even the ugliest of them aspires towards stylishness, even when it descends into uselessness. Tied in with this is the endless variation: hardly any two are alike, and the differences seem utterly intrinsic to the men wielding them. Like the serve, each is as personal as a signature. This is, admittedly, a subjective area.

Philipp Kohlschreiber has one of the prettiest backhands going around, and a way of launching his frame into it that is wholly personal, but that was no reason to believe it would withstand Cilic's probing drives. After all, Mikhail Youzhny and Tommy Haas have equally attractive backhands and both had lost. I realise Cilic has his supporters, and that I'm not endearing myself to them, but I find that his tennis makes Tomas Berdych's seem almost human. All the same, Cilic today proved himself all too human where it matters: between the ears (and behind the forehead). Yesterday he dropped five points on serve against Haas, for the entire match. Today he served at 37%, and only 29% in the first set, which nonetheless limped to a tiebreak only after Kohlschreiber saved a pair of set points.

Cilic later admitted that he'd felt like he was 'trying to catch' the German the whole time. In the heavy conditions, it did seem as though Kohlschreiber's greater endeavour and

variety was setting the pace. He moved to 6-4 in the breaker, and unleashed his second double fault. That's variety. Set points were then traded for a while, before Cilic celebrated an 8-7 lead with a trio of errors. Kohlschreiber broke for 4/2 in the second set, the backhand up the line as ever enabling him to prise open the court. Cilic had multiple chances to break back in the following game, but each time discovered a backhand error when he needed it least, or was aced. Kohlschreiber, generally fearless *all the time*, tightened perceptibly when serving for the title. He'd saved break points with big serves all day, but now began to roll them in. A more assured player than Cilic might have taken advantage, but it wasn't to be. Cilic is Cilic. Kohlschreiber served out his second Munich title.

A native Bavarian, Kohlschreiber afterwards addressed the crowd with immense warmth, charmingly conveying his satisfaction at winning his 'home' title again. He also appeared reasonably chuffed to receive a new BMW Z4, although he stopped short of hugging it, the way Nikolay Davydenko did last year. He did take it for a spin around the court, gouging out part of the surface. For his fans, the good news is that he will move up nine places in the rankings, to No.25, and will now be seeded for Roland Garros. He has also overtaken Florian Mayer to become the top-ranked German.

Belgrade, Final

(2) Seppi d. Paire, 6/3 6/2

I must confess that the first point I watched in Belgrade this week was also the last one played. With a final burnout from Kohlschreiber, the festivities in Munich were officially concluded, and I glanced back at the live score for the Serbian Open final. Contesting his first final, the giftedly French Benoit Paire had moved to an early lead. Andreas Seppi then moved to a middle lead, which included taking the first set, and to a late one, which brought him to championship point. Idly I wondered whether Paire, with an impish sense of irony, might now retire from the match, thereby extending Tipsarevic's notorious gesture in the Eastbourne final into a unique tradition. I could envisage the trivia question in later years: 'Which Italian tennis player won five career titles without once claiming championship point?'

Then the live score updates stopped updating, which was disappointing, since this is really the only thing it has to get right. Every time I glanced back it was 2/5, advantage Seppi. Had some disaster befallen proceedings? Had Paire *actually* retired? A court-invasion? Kohlschreiber in his BMW? Muttering darkly, I opened a stream, just in time to be informed that this was Seppi's sixth match point. He took it, exultantly. Paire took it like a man. The commentator – perhaps the most laconic I have ever heard – sounded

incapable of being excited by anything. He sounded quite a lot like Novak Djokovic impersonating a lounge-singer, an image that is surprisingly easy to conjure up. With time to kill, he slowly worked his way down the stat board, explaining bluntly how each number demonstrated that Paire hadn't been good enough.

Congratulations are in order for Seppi, who is a friendly guy. The stats proved that he was good enough, as did the trophy in his hand.

A Magic Box of Chocolates

Madrid Masters, First Round

(12) Monfils d. Kohlschreiber, 7/5 6/7 6/3

Gael Monfils this afternoon defeated Philipp Kohlschreiber in a fine match in the first round of the Madrid Masters, and afterwards failed to label the court the worst in the universe. It might not have been the best match played today, but this feature alone renders it unique.

Madrid's blue court controversy has proved, to my satisfaction if no one else's, that the vast majority of pundits prefer to talk about anything other than actual tennis given half a chance. Even last week, with three tour level events conducted on red dirt, Madrid dominated the headlines (exceeding even the requisite quota of articles about Nadal, Federer and Djokovic, none of whom were actually playing). Thankfully, Madrid has started. Admittedly, all the chatter is still about the courts, but at least there are now people playing on them.

Upon completing their matches, few of those players showed restraint in criticising the surface. Winners and losers were united in this. Novak Djokovic was particularly incensed after his scrappy three set win over Daniel Gimeno-Traver. Stan Wawrinka declared it to be the worst court he'd ever played on. Sergei Stakhovsky got in early with his complaints, and then got out immediately by folding to Ryan Harrison, who'd earlier risked serious harm by declaring the blue clay 'awesome', although the *fatwa* was later called off on appeal. He *was* still a teenager, after all.

I'm past trying to conceal my bafflement that so many people care this much about the colour of a tennis court. Perhaps I'm biased in this area: I don't care at all. But the sorry state of the surface is a different matter entirely, although the tendency, inevitably, has been to conflate the colour change with the inadequacy of the court's preparation. There was presumably no way this could be avoided.

The word is that Madrid is playing fast, and from my vantage on the far side of the planet this seems to be the case. But Madrid always plays fast, although Nadal and Djokovic proved three years ago that no court is quick enough when two guys are determined to spend all day on it. The balls are light, and the air is thin. It is usually quite slippery, too, but this year the slipperiness has seemingly gone beyond inconvenience, and become distracting, if not downright perilous. No one has hurt themselves yet, but you may rest assured that the first injury will sound the death knell for blue clay, in much the same way that pot hole in Monte Carlo didn't prove how lethal the red version is.

Anyway, back to Monfils and Kohlschreiber. The German, fresh from his BMW acquisition in Bavaria, shot out to an early lead, hustling Monfils all over the court for the first seven games. For a small guy, he can generate tremendous pace. Monfils can generate even more, but all too often, and for entirely private reasons, he prefers not to. The Frenchman seemed distracted, and ended that seventh game by marching through the return and perfunctorily swatting the ball away. Something was up, clearly. Whatever it was – an issue with his shoes was suggested – he apparently fixed it at the changeover. He came out flaying the ball the way a succession of coaches have wished he would. A quick hold to love, and it fell to Kohlschreiber to serve for the set. A pair of set points turned up, begging, but were mercilessly shooed away. Monfils broke, held, and broke again for the set. From 2/5, he'd won five straight games. Most of the rallies ended with a Monfils winner, and no two were alike. Kohlschreiber, forlorn, barely had time to wonder what he'd done wrong. The answer was nothing.

For Monfils it was reminiscent of Doha, where he belted Rafael Nadal from the court. The issue is that he then stops playing like this, for no reason, and certainly not because his form wanes. An effective game plan is abandoned whimsically, and the fact that it allows him to win tennis matches appears to be insufficient incentive to stick with it. Having taken the set, Monfils set about retreating back into his shell. Once again, he was broken to open the set. Outrageous winners gave way to nip and tuck. Somehow, the second set reprised the first perfectly. Kohlschreiber moved to 5/2, and Monfils held. The German served for the set, and was again broken. It was quite eerie. He looked mesmerised. With a mighty effort, he shook himself free, and limped to a tiebreak. Monfils retreated from passivity into ineptitude at this point, and Kohlschreiber stepped in and took control, although Monfils produced the highlight of the day with an outrageous tweener volley off a ripped return.

The third set was cagier still. Until 3/3 all was finely balanced, and a tight finish appeared inevitable. The tension mounted. Then Monfils won twelve straight points and the match was over. Sometimes, you just don't know what you're going to get.

Raonic d. Nalbandian, 6/4 6/4

Milos Raonic was already proving this on an adjacent court, as he quickly set about transfiguring the day's most anticipated match into a largely foregone conclusion. David Nalbandian was by no means at his best, but he would have needed to be pretty close for it to have mattered much. Raonic served 16 aces, and lost zero points on his first serve. But he also won 62% of points against Nalbandian's second serve, due to an eagerness to spank any tennis ball he could lay his forehand on, and a calm assurance once rallies got under way. As with Monfils, there was just no way of knowing what was coming. One point might steam along steadily, while on the next Raonic might belt a backhand winner at the outset. Nalbandian, already frazzled by the impenetrability of the Canadian's service games, grew desperate and ornery. He tossed his racquet about a bit, but that didn't help either.

Raonic will play Federer tomorrow night, in the latter's first match on the popularly-reviled blue clay, and on court Manolo Santana, which Djokovic insists is frustratingly unlike the outer practice courts. We've been hearing all week how dangerous the opening match is for a top player, although this was mostly applied to Nikolay Davydenko and Nadal, which I cannot see being close. There is no conceivable mechanism by which Federer's opener could be more difficult. If this was sufficiently clear when the draw was set free last week, the calmness and completeness with which Raonic today saw off Nalbandian has made it crystalline.

[A Few Points Here or There](#)

Madrid Masters, Second Round

(3) Federer d. Raonic, 4/6 7/5 7/6

'I entered the court believing I could win. I left the court knowing I can win,' declared Milos Raonic after tonight's pulsating three set loss to Roger Federer at the Madrid Masters. It's the kind of grand statement that waits for applause. Behind the placid, solemn intensity of his expression lurks the elegant mind of the aphorist. Just minutes after coming within a few points of a famous victory, he ventured to within a syllable of a balanced phrase. He's young, and there's still time.

For all that it was the last match to finish, it proved to be the centrepiece of the day, and inspired the first full-house of the event. The crowd was raucous, and predictably inclined towards Federer. The blue clay, which looks like nothing so much as laundry powder, has rarely looked so striking. Eager eyes had noted this match's potential the moment the draw escaped, but it is rare that the yearned-for encounter lives up to its billing, even when it eventuates. Federer was returning from a six week sojourn. Raonic, the most accomplished of the new guard, was coming off a strong showing in Barcelona, and had already bludgeoned his way through David Nalbandian, a match that'd turned out to be tough only on paper. Aside from those who were puzzlingly concerned that Davydenko might constitute a threat for Nadal, the belief was unanimous that of all the top players, Federer's opening match was the least civilised. The result wasn't precisely a classic, and it certainly wasn't a clay court classic, but it did successfully evoke the best of those serve-centric indoor blitzkriegs of the 1990s, which is probably not precisely what fans expect from a clay court Masters event in Spain. As Federer remarked afterwards: 'Fast court tennis like the old days of Becker, Edberg and Sampras. A point here or there.' Who said it's not ideal preparation for Roland Garros?

A point here or there was all he was permitted to win on the Raonic serve. The key stat from Raonic's first round win over Nalbandian was that he hadn't dropped a single point on 27 first serves. By the beginning of the second set tonight, he had added another 17 to that total. On the slickest clay in the sport, his first ball was utterly unmanageable. The flat bombs detonated off the tee; the sliders faded halfway up the service box; the kickers leapt like bastards. There were no body serves, which thankfully meant that we didn't have to see Federer flopping and expiring on the court.

Safe in their commentary booth, the inimitable Messrs Koenig and Goodall began to lay bets as to how many consecutive first serve points Raonic might eventually amass. Flak-happy viewers and opponents were by now inclined to believe that the Canadian could last the entire tournament, but the commentators proved more circumspect. Goodall had faith that Federer could find a return before that tally cleared 50. Koenig wasn't so sure. He was just explaining the parameters of the discussion to the viewers, when Federer, with *considerable aplomb* – a Koenig catchphrase – found a point on the Raonic first delivery. 'Would you *believe* it?!' exclaimed Koenig with typical gusto. The commentator's curse had struck again. The final count stood at 44.

Over on Sky Sports, Mark Petchey cautioned Raonic against becoming too distracted or despondent at this turn of events, which suggests he has a pretty low opinion of Raonic's powers of concentration. Surely even the Canadian hadn't realistically believed he

would *never* drop a point, even if the rest of us had. He quickly recovered from this crippling set-back, and didn't drop any more points for a while.

To be fair, Federer had been almost equally impressive on serve, until, at 4/4 in the first set, when he wasn't. A woeful game saw him broken to love, and Raonic served it out peremptorily. Federer opened the second set with a booming ace up the middle, followed by a comprehensive selection of errors, thereby achieving break points for Raonic. The evening looked like it could be over very quickly, and Federer's fans began to prepare their excuses, in which the phrase 'six-week lay-off' featured heavily. However, from this moment on, Federer began to exhibit the mental fortitude he was once known for. For the remainder of a match that had a long way to go, he played the big points better than his opponent. Another of these came at 5/5, when he saved another break point. He had won precisely one point on Raonic's serve to this moment, and the belief had now ossified into a certainty that the only way to break would be if Milos started missing his first delivery. Confounding this new orthodoxy, Federer returned three first serves in the next game, winning each point, and gaining a pair of set points. The first of these was saved with an outrageous one-handed backhand lunge pass from Raonic. Federer took the second with a drop shot winner. From nowhere, it was a set all.

The Sky Sports commentators began to wander off-topic, always a sure sign that they feel their preferred man has it in the bag. Federer, they believed, was clearly destined to run away with it. We arrived at 3/3, and Raonic, defying this prevailing wisdom, was holding easier. Petchey airily declared that a tiebreaker was inevitable, just as he had at 4/4 in the first, right before Federer was broken. This time he was right. Federer won the first point of the tiebreak with a forehand, which was to prove fitting, if not downright lyrical. He was quickly up a mini-break, although he failed to extend it after Raonic impressively out-rallied him on consecutive points, as he had done for most of the night. The mini-break vanished. Then, at 4-5, and after two hours and ten minutes, Raonic played his first truly poor shot of the match, mishitting a forehand approach. Match point Federer. The first served missed, and Federer smashed the second crosscourt for a winner. The *Caja Magica* erupted. A tournament that has thus far known only controversy had now enjoyed its first truly memorable tennis match.

Despite losing, Raonic was superior in every statistical department, aside from the net points won. Unconvinced by the surface, and momentarily doubting his capacity to stay with the Canadian from the baseline, Federer had ensconced himself in the forecourt throughout the second set. Notwithstanding a few minor miracles - especially a few half volleys - he had done barely enough even there. But he *had* done enough, enough to survive long enough for those big points to come round. When they came around, he

proved that there are few better at seizing them, enabling him to claim the stat that really mattered. He won two sets to Raonic's one.

Federer lives to face Richard Gasquet in the next round, an ostensibly more manageable proposition. Raonic will leave for Rome, and the traditional clay of the Foro Italico. He played Federer very close tonight, and is entirely justified in believing he should have won. To think otherwise would be self-defeating, if not delusional. The time is fast approaching when Raonic won't need to insist. He'll soon be winning the stat that matters most.

First Strike

Madrid Masters, Quarterfinals

David Ferrer was tonight defeated in clinical fashion by Roger Federer at the Madrid Masters, whereupon he shocked the attendant media by failing to threaten a boycott of the event next year. Unspoken words, reflecting unthought thoughts, though the words he did speak were unerringly and characteristically gracious. When asked whether top quality tennis was even possible in the Caja Magica, he simply replied that it was.

Novak Djokovic earlier fell to countryman Janko Tipsarevic, and then conducted a press conference defined mostly by its spirited rancour. Before blithely accusing Adam Helfant of negligence, the world No.1 echoed Nadal by summarily declaring that it was the blue clay or him, further eliding the crucial distinction between the court's preparation (which was inadequate) and its colour (which is blue). It's an important distinction to retain, although this is no reason to believe it will be. There are many factors at play here, and the colour of the surface is the least of them, but the media is not at its best when dealing with 'many factors'. It's all or nothing, and the 'all' in this case is that blue clay is too slippery, and the top two won't play on it. This was further inflected by Ion Tiriac's announcement that he was stepping down. He insisted his decision had nothing whatsoever to do with the current controversy, but he's optimistic if he believes that will fly. The 'all' is now that the slippery blue clay has seen the end of Tiriac. Being Tiriac, one doubts whether he cares much.

(3) Federer d. (5) Ferrer, 6/4 6/4

(7) Tipsarevic d. (1) Djokovic, 7/6 6/3

Thankfully, there was still tennis being played in the midst of all this depressing shit. Mostly it was pretty good tennis, suggesting that Ferrer's blunt response was reasonably astute. His comment should be further qualified, however. It is possible to play a *certain*

kind of tennis well. That kind of tennis is aggressive, first-strike tennis. To a man, the surviving semifinals – Federer, Tipsarevic, Berdych and del Potro – are adepts at this. Indeed, most of the losing quarterfinalists were as well, apart from Fernando Verdasco, who'd frankly run his race yesterday against Nadal. It was to Ferrer's credit that he numbered among them, although he is generally a far more assertive player than most pundits give him credit for. Today, faced with the sport's greatest player, against whom he boasted a dismal 0-12 record, Ferrer read the situation perfectly, and realised he needed to go all in. Only forceful red-lining tennis was going to get it done.

Of course, it still didn't get it done, not by some margin. For all that Federer's results have grown mixed in other settings, he remains the world's premiere indoor player, and he has approached Madrid as a fast indoor event. Ferrer belted more winners, laudably, but collected more errors as well. Mostly these two statistics were generated from the Spaniard's own service games. In Federer's service games, the definitive categories were first serve percentage (78%), second serve points won (90%) and break points faced (0). With his serve thus unassailable, a single break each set was sufficient. I am reminded of the old word on Sampras, the way a set could end 6/4 or 7/5, and yet, due to his vice-like hold-game, the opponent would feel it was never close. Yesterday's victory over Richard Gasquet was sealed with three consecutive aces. Today, it ended with two.

Federer will face Tipsarevic next, who like Ferrer seemed to have no trouble with his movement. Djokovic, admittedly, seemed to have plenty of problems in this area, which he made clear via a series of elaborate pantomimes for the crowd's benefit, only occasionally pausing to play tennis. The defending champion has been peevish and distracted all week, in a situation that required greater focus, not less. Tonight it proved telling, against a hitherto overshadowed compatriot determined to seize his chance. Tipsarevic was excellent, especially in the first set tiebreaker, and in saving multiple break-back points to serve out the match. He remained positive and committed, when so often in the past he hasn't. It is a court that rewards risk-taking and forcefulness, and today it rewarded Tipsarevic. Even if he progresses no further, he deserved this victory.

(6) Berdych d. (15) Verdasco, 6/1 6/2

(10) Del Potro d. (16) Dolgoplov, 6/3 6/4

The other semifinal will boast all the nuance of a prolonged artillery duel, conducted between Tomas Berdych (whose ordnance is cybernetically embedded in his shoulders) and Juan Martin del Potro, a howitzer atop a tower. Berdych has moved almost unnoticed through his section of the draw, his inexorable progress overshadowed by

Nadal's stumble and departure. Yet he has only dropped five games in his last two matches, against reasonably strong clay court proponents in Gael Monfils and, today, Verdasco. I didn't see the Monfils match, but today's victory was complete, and unrelenting. He simply never stopped coming with those booming deep drives and serves. Verdasco could seemingly only win points with extravagant forehands, which proved to be unsustainable even in the short-term. I was put in mind of Andy Roddick's rather weak capitulation to Juan Monaco the day after seeing off Federer in Miami.

The mood of del Potro's victory over Alex Dolgoplov was more restrained. Dolgoplov gambolled about with expected panache and struck plenty of flashy winners – the racquet-head speed he generates is freakish for his size and build – but there was an unshakeable sense that del Potro had at least one more gear to go to if he was pressed. He wasn't, and even the commentators often went silent for great stretches of time, succumbing to the overly torpid late-afternoon vibe.

It will be fascinating to see how del Potro rises for the semifinal tomorrow. I have a suspicion that he and Berdych will be evenly matched from the baseline, but that the Czech's willingness to move forward could prove telling. The other decisive factor will be each man's second serve, and how willing the opponent is to return aggressively. While Tipsarevic might conceivably challenge Federer, it is the day's first semifinal that should provide the greater interest, and prove that there is subtle variation to be savoured even when two large men fight with cannons.

A Profane Space

Madrid Masters, Semifinals

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

To the extravagant array of trying conditions already prevailing at the Madrid Masters, today's second semifinal added a fitful and swirling breeze. Roger Federer was already favoured to win, and, while he surely doesn't *like* playing in the wind, he has demonstrated time and again his ability to cope with it better than anyone else. The most recent example of this was of course the Indian Wells semifinal, but another match worth recalling is the US Open quarterfinal in 2010, in which he served as though unruffled by the merest zephyr, while his opponent Robin Soderling was blown away.

Returning to today, Janko Tipsarevic didn't cope especially well, either, especially in the early going, when Federer was completely dominant. Tipsarevic found just two points on Federer's serve in the opening set, and both of those were double faults. The Serb

picked it up in the second, although not sufficiently to deny Federer an early break, sealed with a screaming forehand return winner. There was a lone break-back point, though Tipsarevic's gallant backhand up the line was just long. It's possible that the result might have been different had it landed in, but not terribly likely.

(6) Berdych d. (10) Del Potro, 7/6 7/6

Some hours earlier, Tomas Berdych and Juan Martin del Potro fought out a terrific match, in which the former's serve and the latter's forehand combined to send the winner count into the heavens, hardly weighed down by a modest ballast of unforced errors. This was attacking, uncompromising tennis at its best. And yet, there was tremendous variety here, too. Del Potro several times demonstrated a feathery touch – via drop shots and some slices cunningly dipped at the feet of the approaching Berdych – in addition to excellent defence. Berdych landed numerous blows with his crosscourt forehand, and, as expected, his determination to move forward was generally decisive. Ultimately, the outcome was decided by a few points, and these, unfortunately, were decided by del Potro's mental state, which at key moments grew fissured.

There have been several occasions recently when the famously unflappable del Potro has flapped, a tendency that I have failed to reconcile metaphorically with his commonly-applied nickname, which is the Tower of Tandil. (Indeed, all nicknames based on buildings run into serious problems when applied to anyone excelling in a sport more vigorous than golf.) Cast your mind back to the Indian Wells quarterfinal, when his early challenge was disallowed due to a Hawkeye glitch, initiating a frustrated slump that endured for the entire first set. Today he allowed two calls to get to him. The more crucial of these came late in the match, at 6-6 in the second set tiebreak, and thus didn't affect him for long. A wide del Potro serve to the deuce court was signalled in, Berdych indicated that it was wide, and the umpire Mohamed el Jennati confirmed it, even if it was only by an inch. The Argentine was deeply unimpressed at this, and lost the subsequent point with a soft backhand error, which brought up another match point for Berdych. He took this, via one of those seemingly unremarkable rallies that nonetheless reveal the Czech's mastery of the surface: every shot was made to count, and allowed him to move further up into the court, until he finished it off with an overhead. He thrust his arms aloft, then clenched his fist. This one meant a lot.

Del Potro declined to shake the umpire's hand, instead waving a forefinger in his face. For millions of viewers around the world, Hawkeye had already confirmed that the umpire had been correct on both overrules. Given how incensed he was upon losing, it isn't unlikely that del Potro has confirmed this for himself afterwards. Certainly he

shouldn't have allowed himself to grow so disaffected at the time, but, really, having Hawkeye available on the court would have cleared it up immediately. There are those that insist that it isn't necessary on a clay court, since there is already a traditional mechanism by which close calls can be checked. The inexactitude of the mechanism – the umpire lumbers down from his or her chair, scurries across the court, and then debates the player over the correct mark – is naturally part of its old world charm. Traditions should not be frivolously cast aside, and I suppose it would be regrettable if such an amazing spectacle was lost. But if we cannot discard tradition in the Caja Magica, where it has been long-decreed that anything is possible (aside from guaranteed footing for the players), then where? The Box is a virtual abattoir for sacred cows.

Ironically, given its postmodern presumptions, Madrid also has history in this area. Exactly one year ago, in the semifinals of this very event, Federer sparred at embarrassing length with Mohamed Lahyani about a disputed mark on the court, well beyond the moment when the global audience had seen the umpire's decision confirmed. Of course, being Federer, there's no reason to believe he would have accepted a Hawkeye ruling either, but I think the point stands. Clay courts need Hawkeye less than other surfaces, but it would still help. It would have helped del Potro today – if only to be more sanguine in his loss – unless, as in California, it proved faulty. Then he really would have blown his top. The Tower would prove to be an ICBM silo. The only thing more aggravating than a lack of technology is when it doesn't work, thereby betraying the hallowed covenant between machine and man.

Which brings me neatly back to Berdych. Tomorrow he will contest only his third Masters Series final, hoping to capture his second title at this level. The first came in Bercy, back in 2005, a year in which he was the *only* man other than Federer or Rafael Nadal to win one. 2005 is in some ways an instructive season to look at, and offers a useful reminder to those who gripe that the top four now win nearly everything. Back then, the top two won nearly everything, with only Safin (Australian Open) and Nalbandian (Masters Cup) willing or able to spoil the party. Anyway, Berdych will be attempting to become just the second man outside the top four to win a Masters event in over two years. By reaching the final Berdych has already overtaken David Ferrer in the rankings. If he wins it, he will close on Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at No.5.

Of course, if Federer wins he will move to No.2 ahead of Nadal, which could have profound ramifications for the draw at Roland Garros, although there is no point going into this unless it comes to pass. Even if he loses, there are a number of entirely possible scenarios whereby the move could occur in Rome next week. He will also be seeking to claim his 20th Masters title, putting him back level with Nadal atop the leader board.

Increasingly Jiggy With It

Madrid Masters, Final

(3) Federer d. (6) Berdych, 3/6 7/5 7/5

Roger Federer today defeated Tomas Berdych in the final of the Madrid Masters, thereby cementing his place as the premiere blue clay player of our time. It was his twentieth Masters title – drawing him abreast with Rafael Nadal on the all-time leader board – his tenth career title on clay, and it guarantees that 2012 will be the tenth consecutive year in which he claims at least four titles. He also becomes the first man to win three titles in Madrid, and the first to win it twice on clay in its illustrious four year history. For those who find simple delight in just savouring Federer's numbers, his recent results have been nothing short of, well, delightful.

The score line generally shouldn't be relied upon to properly reflect the actual contours of a given tennis match, since it so often obscures as much as it reveals. But occasionally it tells you enough, inspiring that strange fuzzy glow we feel when life imitates art, or when Will Smith enters the building (more on this later). Today's score is unusual (I can barely recall seeing it before), yet gratifying in that it perfectly evokes a match in which Berdych was astonishingly strong early – his version of unplayable recalls Marat Safin for me – yet ultimately failed to stay with Federer when the going got tightest.

The opening set featured twelve winners from Berdych, to just two unforced errors, and saw Federer stage a mighty fight just to make it as close as it was. Federer was broken in his opening service game, courtesy of that sophisticated double-bluff fake-dropshot forehand slice thing he occasionally does, the one that sees him summarily canonised when it comes off, and ridiculed when it doesn't. It didn't come off, and brought up a break point, which Berdych took by blasting a backhand return across court, his third winner of the game. Normally on clay a single break would not prove decisive, but the phrase 'normally on clay' is a wishful one to utter in Tiriatic's Enchanted Cube, especially against a guy holding as firmly as the Czech. That he was doing this while serving at 42% tells you plenty about his ground game, which was ferocious. Federer played fine, and was frequently left watching winners streak by, an even more interested spectator than the rest of us.

For whatever reason, Federer had tremendous trouble holding serve from the far end today – in all he was broken three times from that end, and never from the other – so it seemed like a dicey prospect when he stepped up to serve for the second set, having

ridden an early break, and blown a few set points on return the game before. Sure enough, he was broken, with Berdych saving the only set point with consummate, scrambling defence, and then sealing the break with more of the same. Federer, with it all to worry about, hardly looked concerned at all, although his legion fans made their feelings clear via various social media. At 5/6, Federer lifted, and brought up another pair of set points on Berdych's serve, with his favoured short slice pass combo – recall how he broke open the Indian Wells final with that play – and a stretching forehand return winner onto the sideline. Berdych double faulted, neither his first of the day, nor his last. Set Federer. Music began to rock through the Box, and the camera picked out Will Smith, seated with his wife. 'Is he getting jiggy with it?' asked Jason Goodall. 'He is!' exclaimed Robbie Koenig. He was.

With his second serve success rate soaring into the forties – it had been mired in the twenties in the opening set – Federer fell behind 0-30 on each of his first three services in the deciding set, but each time contrived to eke out a hold, saving three break points. Berdych was holding more comfortably, until suddenly, serving at 3/4, he wasn't. Federer lifted again, and moved to 0-40 with three excellent points, the best of them a clean backhand return winner up the line. The Swiss thereupon returned to spectator mode, although he wasn't to blame for this. Three vast and assured aces from Berdych, all directed past Federer's forehand wing, mocked the very idea of break point, before a pair of double faults reminded us that pressure has an internal logic of its own, which too often cannot be gainsaid. 5/3, with Federer to serve for the championship. Fatefully, he was again serving from the bad end. Again he was broken, this time without even gaining a match point. Again it was Berdych not merely seizing his opportunity, but extraordinarily rendering back to Ostrava, whereupon it a confession was extracted under torment.

Still Federer looked unfazed, while many of his fans proved that whatever platform eventually replaces Twitter will need a better way of expressing a collective aneurysm than incoherent strings of text, produced by foreheads repeatedly striking keyboards. The tension was, to be fair, immense. It only mounted by the time Berdych stepped up to serve at 5/6. As in the second set, he fell behind quickly. Federer had three championship points. Then suddenly he had none. They'd both won 101 points each. It could not have been tighter. Some desperate defence from Federer earned another match point, and a Berdych forehand error off a tricky short return sealed the match. Federer turned to his player's box, his arms aloft, satisfaction and relief suddenly scrawled clearly across his face.

Berdych was gracious in his runner up speech – praising Roger – as was Federer immediately afterwards, praising Nadal. Tiriac's short speech drew boos and whistles. Then it got weird. For some unfathomable reason Will Smith was also loitering on the hastily erected podium, although the reason became clear when he was called upon to present Federer with his suit from the new Men In Black film, framed behind glass. 'Roger likes his suits,' remarked Goodall, 'Might be a bit of breaking and entering there.' Smith and Federer appear to be of a size, which was fortunate. Had Berdych won, it would have been a snug fit. Perhaps they had another suit ready. Still, baffling as it was, it somehow resulted in a nice moment, and a new addition for Roger's pool room, to go with the flotilla of Dubai ships, and another Madrid trophy, which looks, as ever, like the world's cruellest sex toy.

Madrid's narrative this week has inevitably centred on the blue clay, although as we progressed through the final weekend I was interested to note how the tide of public sympathy appeared to turn, flowing against Nadal and Djokovic, and swirling around Billy Jean King's remark that 'champions adapt'. Federer and Berdych certainly did that. The Rome Masters is already underway, so they'll now need to adapt to that pretty quickly. For myself, I would have no problem with seeing more blue clay (providing the footing is more secure), but I'll be happy to be rid of the complaining about it. It turned out to be a dangerous surface upon which no one was hurt, an unpredictable surface in which only seeded players reached the quarterfinals, that produced the first great Masters final in over a year, capping a memorable event where Roger Federer once again reigns supreme.

Lavish Set Dressing

Rome Masters, Second Round

Of the nine Masters Series events that liberally pepper each tennis season, Rome's Internazionali BNL d'Italia is my favourite. I was recently asked to explain this preference, and came up with, in no particular order: the crowd, the setting, the pacing, the courts, the standard of play, the light, the history, and the vibe. What can one hope to take from that?

The kitsch, grand Foro Italico is a decent place to start, if only for a laugh, and to register the cosmic irony by which fascism's determination to legitimate itself architecturally is so rapidly undone when empires fail to last the distance. There are several ways this can come about. Hitler's brief to Albert Speer was that the grandest Nazi structures - Nuremburg's *Zeppelinfeld* is the exemplar - should achieve a rich

afterlife as ruins once the *Tausendjähriges Reich* had run its course. A millennium proved to be a trifle ambitious, even for Hitler, and the short years since have demonstrated that whatever Speer's gifts, guaranteeing eternal grandeur wasn't among them. (Arguably his greatest gift was to escape prosecution. He didn't get away with murder, but he did get away with hanging out with a lot of murderers, and his primary defence consisted of disingenuousness, and later, doddering.) His structures have not passed time's test, and I suppose the writing was on the virtual wall, etched with shadow, when his most inspired creation – the haunting *Lichtdom* – only lasted a night.

Mussolini's Foro Italico isn't like that. Firstly, rather than seeking to connect itself to an imaginary and vehemently advertised future, it sought legitimacy through an alignment with Eternal Rome. However, thanks largely the presiding ego of *Il Duce*, the alignment feels skewed. It doesn't feel like you're in ancient Rome. It feels, again ironically, more like a movie set. Secondly, it was always conceived as a sports complex, and has, to my knowledge, never stopped being one. Irreversible traducement occurs when a structure is repurposed into irrelevancy – again, look to Speer – but the Foro Italico escaped this fate. It hosted the 1960 Summer Olympics. It now houses the Rome Masters. Yet the irony remains. For all that it apes antiquity, the fact is that there are 'Roman' villas in Los Angeles that are older than the Foro Italico, and crafted with greater attention to period detail. Just because it's in Rome doesn't mean it isn't ridiculous. But just because it's ridiculous doesn't mean it's not fantastic.

There is also the danger – or, let's be honest, the certainty – that this irony will evaporate. Already the process is under way, as all historical epochs beyond living memory collapse in on each other. Borges reminds us that the structural discord underlying *Don Quixote* is now lost to us, pointing out that the allegedly dull world of Cervantes' Spain has since grown as poetic as the romances that once scrambled the Don's brain. The book derived its force from an irony we can no longer feel. The Foro Italico, for all that it is barely 80 years old, now evokes a mighty Roman past, especially in the crucible of sporting combat, when the essential distinction readily melts away. I've stood and laughed at the absurd statues ringing the grounds, but the 2006 Rome final ranks among my favourite matches, and it only gained from the setting. It was viciously gladiatorial – as was the 2005 final – and the venue was marvellously conducive to this, for all that it has hosted as many real gladiators as the *Caja Magica*. Sport, like all good drama, requires the suspension of disbelief, and set-dressing as lavish as the Foro Italico permits tennis to transcend itself.

Of course, the new Court Centrale – which I have never visited – doesn't boast the same cachet, although it looks quite good on my television screen. The old centre court had

already been renamed in honour of two-time Italian Open champion Nicola Pietrangeli, and now serves as the third court. It will no longer witness great finals, although today it inspired former champion Juan Carlos Ferrero to stage multiple comebacks in defeating Gael Monfils. This reminds me that whatever the benefits of the venue, the main reason I love the Rome Masters is the tennis. It just has a habit of staging excellent matches.

(10) Del Potro d. Llodra, 7/5 3/6 6/4

There was never much chance that Michael Llodra could beat Juan Martin del Potro today. He grabbed a set off the Argentine back in Rotterdam, but that is a fast indoor court. Rome is *bona fide* clay, Llodra is authentically 31, and del Potro really is much better at tennis. Unsurprisingly, I can barely recall the Frenchman winning a point from the baseline, until the last games. Until that moment, it was a classic contrast in styles, with Llodra hurtling towards the net, and del Potro either belting a passing shot or grudgingly admiring his opponent's volleying prowess. Llodra had the first set point in the first set, but del Potro had the last one. Llodra, with almost no backhand, took the second, still galloping forward. There appeared to be something wrong with Del Potro's knee. He broke in the third, and moved to 30-0 at 5/3. Llodra produced four great points from nowhere to break back.

Having momentarily averted defeat, Llodra commenced a tirade at the umpire at the changeover, which wasn't precisely what the situation called for, although it was an improvement over hurling racial epithets into the crowd. 'Apologies for the colourful language, folks' offered Robbie Koenig. Jason Goodall isn't in Rome this week, and his absence was suddenly apparent. You just know he would have rejoined with some variation on 'Pardon my French, or not'. Chris Wilkinson wasn't quite up to it. You know you're fan when you begin idly composing routines for them during a highly entertaining tennis match. Del Potro, desperate, was tumbling all over the court by this stage. Caked in clay, he sealed the match with a pair of enormous returns past the incoming Llodra.

In other fine matches, Andy Murray and David Nalbandian gradually got around to producing a classic backhand duel, one that ultimately hinged on a dead net-cord deep in the third, while Lukasz Kubot played with typical flair and aggression to finally beat Potito Starace. The latter was lucky to get a set, although it was worth it since it delayed Murray's appearance on court, thereby sending the British pundits spare.

The Drama Category

Rome Masters, Third Round

Seppi d. Wawrinka, 6/7 7/6 7/6

The question of why Rome is my favourite Masters tournament was addressed with devastating intensity by Andreas Seppi and Stanislas Wawrinka on Court Nicola Pietrangeli today, ably supported by a lone umpire and an extras cast of thousands, each of whom had been extensively coached in the finer points of screaming one's head off. The go-to cliché for any tennis match serviced by a rambunctious and partisan crowd is that it had a 'Davis Cup atmosphere'. Although this can leave journalists grasping for meaningful comparisons in actual Davis Cup matches, today it seemed appropriate enough. For Wawrinka, it must have felt like an away tie. He has long since proven his capacity to stuff those up.

In December's final reckoning, it's questionable whether this match will feature among the Best of the Year – the personnel and scheduling will certainly count against it – but if it fails to make the top five in the Drama category then we can assume there is no justice, or that Fabio Fognini has gone on a sustained rampage. Seppi saved six match points in total, five of them in the final set, four of them on Wawrinka's serve, and three of them in a row from 3-6 down in the last tiebreaker. Wawrinka didn't save any match points, and the ones he lost were testaments to an arm that had grown leaden with tension, directed by a mind crippled by doubt. Seppi, to be fair, hardly looked in better shape. Neither man boasts a particularly accomplished backhand slice, and yet by the end we were treated to the kind of exchanges that Federer and Youzhny make entertaining, and that Dolgopolov and Tomic make interminable. In the hands of Seppi and Wawrinka, however, they were just dreadful, literally: each junky shot bespoke a dread of losing that was almost complete.

Of course, neither player could keep it up indefinitely. Eventually someone would try to force the play, and produce an error. Wawrinka produced the last of these, halfway up the net. The crowd, which had already been whipped to a rich patriotic froth by Flavia Pennetta's emphatic win, went right off its collective nut. Seppi joined them. The statues ringing the court, the very furniture of macho smugness, gazed down with satisfaction. There are few better places in the world to watch tennis.

(2) Federer d. Ferrero, 6/2 5/7 6/1

If Seppi and Wawrinka produced today's most dramatic match – and I've just spent four hundred words insisting on nothing else – it was the day's final match between Roger Federer and Juan Carlos Ferrero that featured the best actual tennis. This was shot-making of the highest order.

Watching, I was transported back eleven years, to the magnificent Rome final of 2001, in which Ferrero overcame Gustavo Kuerten in five sets (another fittingly gladiatorial epic on the old Centrale). I remember marvelling during that match at how Ferrero and Kuerten had seemingly taken clay court tennis to another level, their speed, footwork and accuracy making it look like a hardcourt you could slide about on. Kuerten's decline would come later that year, when as world No.1 he attempted to play through a seemingly innocuous hip injury at the US Open, and despite subsequent surgery was never the same again. The remainder of his career was a long twilight. Ferrero's decline commenced later – after the Australian Open in 2004 – and, for me, has always been trickier to explain. There was chicken pox, and a wrist injury, but upon recovering from those he didn't seem noticeably worse than before. He just couldn't win any more. The temptation isn't inconsiderable to suggest that in those short months the sport had moved on, and Federer's concurrent ascension at that very moment makes it a hard theory to refute. Perhaps appropriately, Federer achieved the No.1 ranking for the first time by thrashing Ferrero in the semifinal of that 2004 Australian Open. Indeed, my chief reason for resisting this theory is a distrust of any idea that is feels so neat.

On the other hand, tonight's match provided compelling evidence that it may well be the case. Ferrero played well, dictating from the forehand, and for the life of me I can't remember anything he used to do much better, although he was spryer about the court in his youth. It's difficult to believe he was 0-6 for the season (coming in to Rome), although injury and age have played their part. Federer was clearly better, with superior weight on all his shots, more clarity in his approach, and greater audacity when pressed. Ferrero's clay court tennis, which once represented a quantum leap forward, now looked somewhat old school. Nevertheless, the Spaniard's effort to take that second set was mighty, and if there's a match today that's worth finding the highlights of, this is it. Federer will play Seppi in the quarterfinals, meaning the Italian will need to see off Switzerland's entire Davis Cup squad if he is to progress to the semifinals (where I think he'll face Severin Luthi). At least the crowd will be up for it.

Elsewhere

In other matches, Juan Martin del Potro was sadly unable to overcome a dodgy knee, general fatigue, an absent crowd, or Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's strangely imposing backhand, either singly or, fatally, in combination. Rafael Nadal produced a pair of bread-sticks, and then proceeded to beat Marcel Granollers about the head with them.

Novak Djokovic attacked the allegedly paradisiacal surface of Court Centrale with special vehemence, disqualifying his tennis racquet from further use as anything but a memento. Later on he proffered the hope that no kids had seen him behaving thus. Presumably there are plenty of children without television sets or any interest in tennis who missed it, who were therefore spared the horrifying vision of a grown man breaking a piece of sporting equipment. For the other unlucky souls, the ATP runs a counselling service. Juan Monaco was excellent, but not quite excellent enough.

Andy Murray was quite good early, then a little bit bad, and then good again in the first set tiebreaker. After that it was all bad, all the way to the end, and especially on break points. Richard Gasquet, normally so empathetic in this respect, somehow didn't allow himself to be dragged down. Murray, as is his way, swore at everyone for a while about the shadows and the dirt. There was no escaping either, since this is Eternal Rome. And since it is, it seems apposite to quote Horace: *Pulvis et umbra sumus*. We are dust and shadow. Something for the Scot to consider, as he departs for The City of Light.

Intrepid Naturalists

Rome Masters, Semifinals

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

Until he stepped up to serve for tonight's second semifinal at the Rome Masters, Novak Djokovic had dropped just one point on his first serve. It was an impressive stat – worthy of Milos Raonic – for all that the top seed wasn't landing enough first serves to make it overwhelming. The score was 5/4, in the second set. Match point arrived, and a rally ensued. Federer saved it with a mighty forehand winner onto the line. You may vaguely recall something similar happening when these two last played, in 2011's US Open semifinals, but reversed. The symmetry was almost too perfect, and surely wasn't lost on Djokovic, especially when Federer then broke to level the set on his first break point of the match.

Although beset by his own service woes, Federer then served out the following game at love, from the end at which he'd already dropped serve three times. Suddenly, he was winning the long rallies. In every sense, momentum had shifted, and for a mind like Djokovic's, always curiously alert to such things, that forehand on the line to save match point must have lent the turning tide the inexorability of fate. It is to Djokovic enormous credit that he was not thus reduced to mere fatalism, the way he used to be in his long apprenticeship as world No.3.

He attained the tiebreaker, narrowly denying Federer a set point. From that moment on, Djokovic demonstrated why he is no longer the world No.3. The precedent for this match turned out not to be that famous US Open semifinal, but those littering Djokovic's path to the Miami title last month. In both the quarterfinals and semifinals at Key Biscayne, the Serb had been impeccable for the opening set, and then fought through a tougher second, before gaining the vital break. On both occasions, he was broken while serving for it, but took the subsequent tiebreaker comfortably. That being said, those matches had been against Juan Monaco and David Ferrer, who despite being very fine players, are not Federer. Djokovic's exultant roar upon winning the match was a testament to this. He really hadn't wanted this going to a third.

It would be misleading to pretend that it was a close match, though. Federer later confessed to some fatigue after playing nine matches in the last eleven days, even as he studiously balanced this out by insisting that Djokovic had been too solid anyway. The attendant media maintain a delicately calibrated set of scales at these press conferences, and can be relied upon to trumpet any comments that shift the balance away from lavishly praising one's opponent. Certainly the numbers bear out Federer's assessment. He committed 42 unforced errors – which is rather a lot for two sets, and over twice as many as his opponent – and served below 50%, which is virtually unheard of for him. Numbers like that were never going to get it done.

On the subject of interesting numbers, this match was a very rare example of a semifinal between the two top-ranked players in the world, which in tournament play can only happen if the rankings change after the seedings are announced, as happened last week. A curiosity.

(2) Nadal d. (6) Ferrer, 7/6 6/0

Earlier, Rafael Nadal and David Ferrer tramped along a worn if narrow path, on which the smaller Spaniard demonstrated characteristic discipline by never venturing more than a single step ahead of his more favoured compatriot. They're like a pair of intrepid amateur naturalists who've stumbled upon a hidden ravine, within which is contained an

entirely new ecosystem of putatively limitless diversity. Hardly believing their own luck, they establish camp, and meticulously catalogue their discoveries, before submitting each to Royal Societies and learned science journals the world over. Apparently no one has the heart to tell them they've been sending in the same tree frog over and over again for some time, and could they please stop.

In other words, there are only so many times Ferrer can fail to capitalise on a lead from Nadal before the fans groan, and decide they've seen it all before. Indeed, we saw it all before only three weeks ago, in the Barcelona final. I suppose it was awfully thoughtful of Nadal and (especially) Ferrer to restage that match for those few Luddites incapable of locating any highlights for themselves, and who were indisposed when it was originally played, perhaps because they were erecting a barn. For the rest of us, it was all wearily familiar.

It was soon after Nadal had claimed the first set tiebreak that it occurred to him that the frog he'd been painstakingly preparing for postage looked uncannily similar to earlier versions. He peered closely. If there were variations here, they were sufficiently subtle as to defy taxonomy. Suddenly coming to his senses, Nadal packed up his gear and made to break camp, but not before marching over to Ferrer's side of the camp and smashing it up; slicing apart his hammock, emptying his pack in the creek, and filling his sleeping bag with hundreds of disappointingly identical tree frogs. Forlorn amidst the shambles of his gear, Ferrer could no longer hope to keep up. Nadal was home and fed before his poor countryman had even dried his underwear. This is a metaphor.

As a match, it demonstrated that form is an ephemeral thing, even for Nadal on red, low-altitude clay. He was frightening good against Tomas Berdych in yesterday's quarterfinal, committing only 10 unforced errors while hardly holding back. Today he produced 20 in the first set alone, and most of these were off the backhand. Ferrer has learned from long experience that this is the wing to break down. We can qualify this by pointing out that it had seemed pretty obvious that this was the optimum tactic almost immediately after Nadal appeared on the tour a decade ago, although this isn't to say that everyone has gotten the message. Berdych still approached at the forehand yesterday, as did Federer in Melbourne, although he appears to have learned the lesson since. Stretching Nadal to the backhand wing opens up his forehand corner, which enables the enterprising right-hander to go inside-out into the gap, or, if you're Djokovic, smack a crosscourt backhand. As an exercise in geometry, it hardly exceeds Euclid, and I don't mean to imply it is a schematic for certain victory. You don't win 47 French Opens without a capable backhand, after all, and the ability to defend off either side. But it gives guys like Ferrer a fighting chance. Why then does he abandon it when

he builds a lead? The ability to stick with a winning plan is ironically among the rarest in the sport, assuming your game boasts any variety at all.

Leading 3-1 in the tiebreak, Ferrer opted for a drop shot when he should have pressed the advantage. It didn't come off. In the second set, it no longer mattered. Ferrer was by now pre-occupied with fishing his unmentionables out of the creek. Nadal, gambolling homeward along the track, barely put another foot wrong. He made just six unforced errors in the second set. Although this wasn't paired with any special aggression, the way it had been yesterday, it was still sufficient to earn a bagel, which he tucked into when he got home.

Tomorrow Nadal will face Djokovic in a replay of last year's final, a match rich in portent and possibility. For all that the Spaniard defeated Djokovic in Monte Carlo - and acknowledging that I am disinclined to over-qualify any result - there is no sense in denying that Djokovic was hardly at his best in that match. He was not the same world No.1 that had defeated Nadal in seven consecutive finals, or even that saw off Federer tonight. Nadal would have known that, and tempering his delight at claiming the title would have been the uneasy presence of an absence, as when Darth Vader struck down Obi-Wan Kenobi's empty robe. Defeating Djokovic in tomorrow's final will go some way towards redressing that, ensuring that this time, after the kill, there's a corpse.

For Djokovic, defending his title is probably motivation sufficient unto itself, especially since it would reassure everyone that the world No.1 remains the world's best player. Beyond that, it will provide valuable momentum for Roland Garros, given that he is seemingly destined to face Nadal there. Precisely when he would face Nadal in Paris is another issue. If Djokovic wins tomorrow's final, Nadal will remain adrift of Federer at No.3, and will therefore be seeded third at the French Open. This opens up the possibility of drawing Djokovic in the semifinals - a 50% possibility, to be precise, stolidly ignoring the guttural bellows of those who insist the draws are rigged anyway. This means that Federer wouldn't have to fight through either of them on the way to the final, and that his opponent in the final would have won a potentially Pyrrhic victory the round before. It's a long way off, but nearer than you'd think.

There is a great deal to play for, even for those who aren't playing.

Psychic Wreckage

Rome Masters, Final

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

Patchily arrayed beneath threatening skies, a modest crowd greeted the players as they entered Court Centrale for the Rome Masters final, although what it lacked in biomass it made up for in enthusiasm and rhythmic prowess. Flags waved and hips gyrated, whipped to near-dislocation by the sudden deceleration from dance music to the theme from Star Wars, the event's way of suggesting that we were in for an epic, and maybe Wookies. I failed to quell the suspicion that there were just about enough people to really get Court Pieterangli rocking. The camera dutifully lingered on the densest pockets, and the most psychotically happy.

What the camera missed was yesterday's absent crowd, and the sense of the stadium as a palimpsest. Today's match, assuming the weather held off, would be conducted amidst the psychic wreckage of Sunday's abandoned one, although the real wreckage left on the court had been cleared away. It failed to acknowledge the acute suffering of those thousands who'd endured Maria Sharapova's eventual victory in the women's final only to skulk around for hours while the men's final did not get under way, which proved to be only marginally more entertaining. As evening fell, they'd been told it was a no-go, and they were free to go. Some of them went off. They were offered a 50% refund on their tickets, whereupon they rioted, although it was only a very modest riot, the kind of riot Italian fans use to stay in shape during the off-season, or to work up an appetite. The court was littered with plastic bottles. Having discovered their expensive tickets were worth considerably less than they'd realised, they left the stadium to be reminded that they didn't have tickets to the far more exciting *Coppa Italia* final, either. Reports are they rioted again, briefly, on their way home. For the record, Napoli upset Juventus 2-0.

All rioted out, precious few of these fans returned for today's final. They therefore missed a match that turned out decidedly less epic than the soundtrack promised. Still, though it was an encounter that ultimately proved unworthy of relocation to the old centre court, it boasted no shortage of exciting moments, although these merely punctuated swathes in which little enough occurred. The pace of play, predictably, was glacial. The rallies were long, service winners were rare, and the sojourns between points were extravagant. The first three games took twenty minutes. In other words, an epic was brewing, although one that owed less to George Lucas than Tarkovsky. At least

one linesman nodded off, which some have argued cost Djokovic the first set, although I'd argue that if it did, it certainly shouldn't have.

The moment came at 5/4 30-30 in the first set, with Nadal serving to stay in a set that no one would have been shocked to see Djokovic claim. An inevitable rally ensued, then unfolded, then sprawled. Eventually an opening presented itself, and Djokovic went after a forehand up the line. The linesman roused himself from slumber long enough to call it out, which was overruled by the umpire. A potential set point was therefore transfigured into a replayed point, and a hitherto focussed Djokovic was reduced to a merely outraged one. This was strange, since it wasn't as though the shot had been a winner (Nadal actually retrieved it). It was enough for the world No.1, though. Nadal took the game easily, with Djokovic committing premature errors before the rallies could even reach the 75-shot mark. Nadal broke in the following game – the breakpoint was a minor masterpiece from Nadal, as he forced the play with a drop shot on only the fourth stroke of the rally, then won a rapid exchange at the net. When Nadal eventually took the first set, Djokovic smashed his racquet against the net post, inspiring a moment's consternation from a nearby ball-girl.

If the first set - after the customary trading of breaks - witnessed Nadal holding on grimly, the second saw the roles reversed. The Spaniard broke immediately, and would not relinquish that advantage until the end, although Djokovic went to impressive lengths to blow the chances he created. In all the Serb failed to convert six break points in the second set, and most were indeed a failure on his part, especially the service game in which Nadal fell to 0-40. The worst was a simple drop volley with Nadal stranded behind his backhand baseline, that the world No.1 pushed at least a foot wide. The match, perhaps fittingly, ended with a double fault from Djokovic. Why not? Nearly everything else had gone wrong. The stadium had filled by this time, and the crowd's collective roar would have lifted the roof, had there been one, though if there had been, it would have been a different crowd on a different day. I don't know . . . It was loud.

For Nadal his sixth Rome title is a clay-court victory over Djokovic utterly and gratifyingly free of qualification, without bereavement, Ion Tiriac or injury to muddy the waters. Conditions were fine, the court is barely twenty metres above sea level, and both men were motivated and healthy. The Spaniard concludes his French Open preparation with two straight-sets wins over Djokovic, providing a neat contrast on last year, when he won no sets in a pair of losses. Plenty of people are claiming that this reasserts his place as the premiere player on red clay. I fail to see how this matter was ever in dispute.

This doesn't imply that today's final was therefore a great match, since it wasn't, or that both guys were necessarily at their best, since they weren't. Nadal was mostly decent, but the story, for me, was Djokovic. This was a guy crumbling under pressure, duffing smashes, and missing routine shots, when he'd spent an entire year proving to us that he doesn't do those things any more. Of course, he used to do these things all the time. The 2007 US Open final established his impeccable credentials early on. But somewhere, after the 2010 Davis Cup, he'd discovered a mind without doubt. He appears to have misplaced it. Today, every key moment revealed the tension of a man who has rediscovered his uncertainty, and will not be easily parted from it. Indeed, today's match more or less looked like a clay court match between these two would look had 2011 never occurred.

Anyone can win when they play perfectly all the time. Today proved that, against Nadal on this clay, playing your best is the *only* way to win. Djokovic played poorly, especially at the most important moments, but it would be backhanded indeed to pretend Nadal played no part in this. Nadal was far from perfect – three days ago he vouchsafed us a view of what perfection might look like when he denied a very strong Berdych so much as a set, and today was not like that – but on this surface his good enough is more than good enough. Djokovic afterwards raised eyebrows by insisting he didn't think his opponent had played that well.

The key number is that Nadal moves ahead of Roger Federer once more. For all that the Swiss allegedly sits on the right hand of God, he wasn't able to convince the big guy to keep the rain going indefinitely. Consequently Nadal regains the No.2 ranking, and with it the second seeding for next week's French Open. He also surpasses Federer atop the all-time list of Masters titlists, with 21. Indeed, he and Federer have now won five of the last six Masters events, which is the kind of thing they used to do before Djokovic and Murray spoiled it all. It was also the umpteenth time that Nadal has won a title without dropping a set – apologies for the technical term – which used to feel like a rare achievement, but doesn't any more. Indeed, Djokovic proved in Miami that you can do it even when you aren't at your best. Apart from that match against Berdych, Nadal was by no means at his best this week. But when you're the greatest clay-courter ever to heft a racquet, it hardly matters.

Of Curses and Inspiration

Nice, Second Round

It is apparently the best kept secret in professional men's tennis that the Open de Nice Côte d'Azur is cursed. This is the only reasonable explanation for why otherwise astute professional men's tennis players keep turning up, despite knowing that victory here leads inexorably to incurable insanity and short-term tragedy. For all that this is just its third year, the event has an impeccable record.

Richard Gasquet claimed the inaugural title in 2010, thereby foolishly believing that he had gained valuable momentum heading to Paris. This momentum carried him through two sets in the opening round, but was then cruelly withdrawn. From two sets up, he fell to Andy Murray. Being Murray, we thought no more of it. It was just one of those things. We shook our heads, shrugged with arch-Gallic offhandedness, and said, 'That's Reeshard for you.'

Nicolas Almagro – the premiere clay-courter at 250 level tournaments where no one better attends – won Nice last year, despite the fact that he gained no benefit from the points whatsoever, having already maximised that component of his rankings. One might argue that it was, again, all about securing momentum for Roland Garros, especially given his characteristically poor showing at the prior Masters events. Again, he galloped through a pair of sets in his opening round, but then capitulated with noisy industry to Lukasz Kubot in five. Now, Kubot has his qualities – Ivo Karlovic can attest to this – but he is no Murray. Alarm klaxons blared. Shrugging, and declaring 'That's Nico', simply wasn't going to cut it.

There is no way around it. Nice is cursed, and the dazzling splendour of the setting only renders its horror noirish. And yet, like that obviously haunted house on the hill that teenagers somehow cannot stay out of, players keep coming back. Even Almagro is back this year, suggesting that the curse also has a memory wiping component, or that the Spaniard simply cannot be taught. Perhaps he has a thing for blue. Literally everything about the event - except, amusingly, the court - occupies that part of the spectrum: the sky, the sea, the hoardings, the uniforms of the officials. It seems like an opportunity missed for Ion Tiriac, a legitimate shot at *tout d'azur*. Think of the *visibility*.

(Q) Baker d. (4) Monfils, 6/3 7/6

As I rule I'm wary of inspirational stories emanating from the United States, where a vast and lucrative flea market exists for the trading of such baubles. The market's demand is sufficiently voracious that guaranteeing adequate supply has grown to

become an industry unto itself, causing a profitable line in the manufacture of heroes, and a consequent dilution of the very concept of heroism. We call this industry 'the media'. For the most part these inspirational stories inspire nothing beyond depression. Enough of them escape the US borders that we in the benighted parts of the globe can guess at the power of their source, and wonder: if this is the stuff they export, what do they keep for themselves? I've have undertaken two road trips across the breadth of the continental United States in order to experience this phenomenon from up close. It was hardly de Tocqueville, but by the end of each journey, there was a real danger of over-inspiration. Your heart can only soar so many times before it is grounded indefinitely. How do Americans get anything done? (It's questionable whether Australia or Britain are really much better. If we are better, it is probably only because we lack the wherewithal to be worse. Australia could never produce a slags-to-riches story like Kim Kardashian, for all that my compatriots seem eager to consume her. Elsewhere in the world, she would, quite rightly, be manning a cash register, with hourly tutorials in its operation. In America she became a beacon of hope for millions.)⁷

I hesitate to call Brian Baker a hero – especially not of Kardashian's calibre – but I cannot deny that his story, by any reckoning, is inspirational. Even from half the world away, the qualitative difference is clear, especially from the way it has cut through. Scant weeks ago, no one was talking about this guy. Personally, I had forgotten he existed, despite the fact that I actually watched and enjoyed his victory over Gaston Gaudio at the 2005 US Open. (To balance the ledger, I don't think Baker, if pressed, could tell you much about my achievements, such as they are.) His story was sad – another great talent crippled by injury – but it hardly seemed comparable to say, Mario Ancic or Joachim Johansson. But then he came back, basically from nowhere. I won't go into the details here, since everyone probably knows them by now. As I say, it's stirring stuff, and it has cut through.

Yesterday he defeated Sergei Stakhovsky in the opening round in Nice, his first victory at ATP level in approximately forever. Tonight he beat Gael Monfils in three sets. It was a tremendous performance, and a quite magnificent advertisement for Baker's game, which combines easy power with excellent court sense and a very solid return. Late in the piece, deep in the third set tiebreaker, he saved a set point with a gutsy second serve ace, suggesting that the entire package is anchored by an iron will, or balls of steel. To those who contend that Monfils wasn't at his best – and he wasn't – how do we know that Baker was? What does his best even look like?

⁷ *Kardashian's Wikipedia entry declares her to be, among other things, a celebutante. I confess I had not heard this term before, for all that subsequent investigation yielded up a rich history spanning over 70 years. Microsoft Word, for the record, does not recognise it.*

If nothing else, it proves that the French Open wildcard he earned is totally deserved. He'll play Mikhail Kukushkin tomorrow in the quarterfinals, which means that a semifinal is entirely possible. Even if he progresses no further, his ranking has leapt well inside the top 200, and he has, quite literally, nothing to defend. If his body maintains some structural integrity – and I can imagine no dicier 'if' – he is unquestionably bound for the top hundred. The main trick will be not to win the tournament this week, since there's no telling what its capricious retribution will be.

Baker's performance today contrasted tellingly with those of the lauded new guard. Bernard Tomic twice blew double match point in the deciding set against Kukushkin. The Australian will be seeded next week in Paris, and it's hard to cavil at his results throughout the clay season, since they are a significant improvement over last year's. Still, he should have won, and a quarterfinal against Baker would have been one to savour. Meanwhile Grigor Dimitrov went down barely fighting to Gilles Simon, without incident or endeavour. The Bulgarian, frankly, is *languishing*. He is far too young to be, but I can think of no better word.

Luck of the Draw: Roland Garros 2012

'Halle named a street after Federer; Roland Garros just inaugurated a highway after Nadal.'

This cogent line was uttered by Italian journalist Enrico Maria Riva upon surveying the French Open men's singles draw, which was earlier harvested at a special ceremony in Paris. If I could say it better myself I would, but I doubt I can. In addition to its elegance, it boasts the merit of telling you what you need to know. It tells you that the top half of the draw – Novak Djokovic's half – is a goat track strewn with boulders, and laced with land mines.

Djokovic again shares the half with Roger Federer, who in turn cohabits a quarter with Tomas Berdych and Juan Martin del Potro, though Federer won't have to play both, since they're cruelly drawn to meet each other in the fourth round. This seems rather early, and, given that it may well turn out to be the match of the tournament, probably *is* too early. They belted out a tight, high-quality semifinal in Madrid two weeks ago, which Berdych won, only to discover Federer in the final. His reward in Paris will be the same, so if he plans on reaching the semifinals he'll have to actually beat the Swiss. Then he'll face Djokovic, then Nadal. This is a complicated way of saying that Berdych or del Potro have as tough a draw as they come. Federer has drawn David Nalbandian in the second round, which isn't necessarily easy, but if he can't beat the Argentine by this stage he

has no business thinking he can win Roland Garros. The draw says Federer will meet Andy Roddick in the third round, although Roddick's results in Düsseldorf this week deny this.

Djokovic's draw would be tricky if it were on any surface but clay. But it is on clay. Lleyton Hewitt in the second round should provide the reigning world No.1 with a decent opportunity to rehash that venerable speech about what a tough fighter the Australian is, and how one must never count out a former No.1, a speech first delivered by Churchill in the House of Commons during the Blitz. It's a trusty old warhorse, and never fails to inspire a rousing cheer. Jürgen Melzer is nearly drowning in qualifiers, like Hugh Hefner with Playboy bunnies, which probably won't adequately prepare him for Djokovic's expert ministrations in the third round, assuming the Austrian gets that far, which I don't. He may well drown for real, figuratively.

Brian Baker's draw, on the other hand, seems quite manageable. He'll face Xavier Malisse first up, thus providing the Belgian with yet another way to feel humiliated at a Major event. Malisse won't have lost to anyone like Baker before. Presumably it's these new experiences that keep him going. If Baker wins - and he hasn't lost for a while - he'll face the winner of Gilles Simon and Ryan Harrison, which will likely be Simon. That second round will be very winnable, though I'm not sure for whom.

Speaking of reasons to keep going, and inspiring stories: Tommy Haas has successfully qualified for the main draw, thereby rubbing everyone's faces in just how much he still enjoys this sport. Not that I'm complaining. I want him to keep going for ever. The qualifiers haven't yet been inserted into the draw, but there's a good chance Haas will end up among Melzer's sea of playmates. Then again, he could face Gasquet, who has drawn a qualifier first up. If so, a duel of attractive one-handed backhands will ensue. One hopes Grigor Dimitrov will be in attendance, schedule permitting. It's high time he abandoned this Baby Federer caper, and recalibrated his goals more realistically. Baby Gasquet, or Baby Haas? Dimitrov, incidentally, plays Donald Young first up. He should win. He owes it to himself.

Rafael Nadal opens against Simone Boleli, and then the winner of Denis Istomin and Igor Kunitsyn. It really would save time if he played both guys - or even all three - simultaneously. Some may argue that that's unfair. Perhaps Nadal could spot them a set to even it up. He may well face Ivo Karlovic in the third round. It has already been suggested that his early troubles against John Isner last year prefigure a tough encounter with the giant Croat, since once players exceed a certain height, they're apparently interchangeable. He'll probably discover either Milos Raonic or Juan Monaco

in the fourth round. His quarterfinal opponent, according to the seedings, is Janko Tipsarevic. The scenario whereby Nadal might actually lose prior to the semifinals is consequently difficult to envisage, although it might involve a meteoroid hurtling earthwards, with Bruce Willis otherwise indisposed.

Who Nadal will face in the semifinals is a matter of special urgency for British fans. Last year Andy Murray hobbled and lurched to the last four through an astonishingly generous draw. His draw is not so kind this year, though this might conceivably change once play is under way, and the upsets inevitably begin to mount. Murray is apparently carrying a back injury, which won't help. Boris Becker advised Murray to skip the event. Murray's extensive media training presumably stopped him from telling Becker to bugger off. He's drawn to face the otherwise indefatigable David Ferrer in the quarterfinals, just the guy you don't want to see when feeling tender. Depending on how that pans out, Becker might yet be added to Murray's retinue in an advisory capacity. Imagine he and Lendl sharing a player's box. Sadly, history offers no good reason to think Ferrer will get that far. Normally so prosaic and methodical in his approach, he has in the past displayed uncharacteristic flair in finding creative ways to lose before the later rounds, a talent almost worthy of Malisse. Paris brings out his best in achieving his worst. Let's hope for something different this year.

Peaking at the Right Time

Nice, Final

(3) Almagro d. (Q) Baker, 6/3 6/2

Nicolas Almagro today defeated Brian Baker in the final of the Open de Nice Côte d'Azur, thereby defending his title, and ruining the best feel-good story the sport has known in years. He did it quite emphatically, with a magnificent display of serving, immense skills off the ground, and a complexion worthy of a skin-cream commercial. He was, it must be said, without blemish. He was also a clear cut above his opponent today, and clearly superior to anyone Baker has faced en route to the final. Characteristically, Almagro has peaked at precisely the right time, the week before a Major.

The same might be said of Baker, but in his case there's really so little data to go on that we'd be making an assumption. He has played eight matches in the last week and a bit, and many of them were close. Perhaps, for him, this is an ideal preparation. His physical history suggests otherwise, I suppose. It suggests that one tournament every seven years is about the sweet spot. At least today's match wasn't overly long, and, mercifully, the French Open has given him tomorrow off.

Still, if the final wasn't long, it was closer than the score-line suggests. Many of the game went to deuce. It's true that most of those occurred when Baker was serving, but at least he didn't go down easily. They were often followed by an Almagro service game lasting about a minute. The stream I was watching was the best I could find, but it still didn't permit me to follow the ball on first serves. If only the court had been blue: it turns out the Côte was azure everywhere but where it matters. As I say, Almagro served tremendously, and my stream was good enough to register him roll his arm over, the crowd volume to rise, and Baker to trudge to the other side a few times, and then to his chair. In lieu of a definitive first serve of his own, Baker's game relies heavily on his capacity to break, and Almagro took that away from him. I am not alone in wondering what this will mean when the American encounters more fearsome servers on a faster court.

The upshot was the Almagro was hoisting the 'trophy' in a touch under seventy minutes. Unlike last year, I believe the points from this title – his twelfth – will actually count towards his ranking. In a few days he will face Paolo Lorenzi in the first round of the French Open. It's hard to imagine how Almagro will blow a two set lead to the likeable Italian veteran, but luckily it's not my job to organise it, merely to witness it unfold. The malign sprites that cursed Nice are not to be trifled with, and Almagro has thumbed his pimple-free nose at them twice too often. It will not stand.

World Team Cup, Final

Tipsarevic d. Berdych, 7/5 7/6

Troicki d. Stepanek, 2/6 6/4 6/3

To the vexing question of what the Davis Cup would look like if it was played in a single week – assuming that single week fell directly before Roland Garros, and it was contested at a modest venue in western Germany – the answer has always been Düsseldorf's World Team Cup. For over 30 years, eight teams have fought valiantly for the right to be declared the most exhausted as they head to the French Open. Offsetting this slightly, the event is sponsored by Power Horse, who, it turns out, make some kind of equine-themed energy drink, and (disappointingly) do not manufacture outboard motors, at least according to their corporate literature. Serbia has now won the World Team Cup for the second time.

In the final they defeated the Czech Republic, granting the Czechs valuable experience in losing national team-based tennis events on clay, since they are travelling to Argentina for the Davis Cup in a few months. It is also revenge of sorts, since the Czechs saw off

the Serbs in a spiteful Davis Cup tie in Prague a few months ago. We could therefore say there was a lot riding on this outcome. We would therefore be wrong.

Still, the Serbs were quite emphatic in their victory, which included glorious triumph in both singles rubbers. In the first, Janko Tipsarevic saw off Tomas Berdych in straight sets, although the effect was rather ruined when one of them wasn't a tiebreak. These two have history in this area (again, see Prague). It was reasonably tight, but I don't want to give the impression that its intensity was excessive. It felt like a hotly contested exhibition match, rather like Kooyong the week before the Australian Open. Berdych didn't look too distraught afterwards, certainly less so than in Madrid a few weeks back.

The key difference between Düsseldorf and other warm-up-type events is that, for whatever ill-defined reason, the World Team Cup is sanctioned by the ATP, and therefore awards ranking points – at a rate unique to itself – and the match results count on the official record. Given this official imprimatur, I wonder if the results therefore carry more weight in the players' minds. Does Tipsarevic feel more satisfaction at this win over Berdych than if it had occurred at, say Abu Dhabi back in January?

Actually, Tipsarevic is the wrong example. No one has been more fired up than him this week. His celebrations upon beating Philipp Kohlschreiber yesterday – from what I saw, the match of the week – were roughly commensurate with reaching a major semifinal. His celebrations upon beating Berdych were similar, but he topped this easily when Viktor Troicki clinched the title, leaping onto his team-mate's back. It certainly *felt* like Davis Cup, especially when Radek Stepanek was left idling at the net without a hand to shake, evoking tense memories of that soulless barn in Prague. It was all innocent enough, though, under the complicated Rhineland sun.

Castles Built on Air

French Open, Day One

(5) Tsonga d. (Q) Kuznetsov, 1/6 6/3 6/2 6/4

As the French Open's laborious preparations ground wearily on – adapting Lardner's famous stage direction, the curtain was raised for seven days to denote the lapse of a week – we could say that protesting one's non-favouritism had become the tournament's prevailing theme, if it wasn't already the theme of every tournament. The perennial avowal of underdog status would be tedious even if it was confined to the Davis Cup, but ubiquity has long-since converted it into white noise, which is only of interest when it goes away.

Therein lies the rub. If a player concedes his favouritism he is branded as arrogant. Even saying nothing is dutifully noted by onlookers keen for an angle, since silence is an admission of something or other. Thus we have a race to the bottom, as players think up ever more imaginative reasons why they couldn't possibly win, and attempt to deliver them in the least offensive way possible. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga arguably went too far in opting for a structuralist approach last week, raising hackles by declaring that neither he nor any French player had a chance of winning the French Open, which is what everyone else thought anyway. He was summarily condemned, and it's hard not to think that many people who otherwise lament the blandness of athlete's responses were among those handing down the verdict. Tsonga probably shouldn't have spoken on his compatriot's behalf, and it presumably won't help his chances much, since professional athletes must perform within a bubble of self-delusion. But who among us can begrudge a guy for telling the truth? Lots of people, it turns out, many of whom were quick to point out that belief and hope matter, ephemeral though they are.

As I say, it's not enough merely to avoid saying the wrong things. Forgetting to say all the right things in the right order also lifts eyebrows. There's a sudden gap in the white noise, like sitting on a beach and having the ocean momentarily go quiet. The top players are adept at ensuring this doesn't happen, and thus we end up with **gripping headlines like these**. One could argue that it's not the players' fault, that in each case they're merely answering a dull question with the answer it merits. It's a perfectly valid argument, since these are smart guys, and in person they don't sound anything like this robotic. At the beginning of each event, every player should be given a stack of cards, upon which is inscribed: 'I'm sorry, but your question is just too silly, and you're obviously fishing for a sound bite. Also, I'm not going to talk about my socks, any more. I reserve the right to remain silent.'

Tsonga looked like vindicating his low expectations throughout the first set of today's opener against Andrey Kuznetsov, although he picked it up after that, winning the last three comfortably. He may have determined that no Frenchman will hoist the *Coupe des Mousquetaires*, but losing in the first round to a Russian qualifier is not the preferred way to go about achieving this goal. Afterwards Tsonga maintained the pragmatic course he'd earlier charted, reiterating his total lack of favouritism, and discussing the related issue of pressure. He apparently feels no pressure in Paris (but will at Wimbledon), since he has no expectation of winning. It's a consistent line, but, like everyone else, I do question its usefulness. The Parisian crowd probably don't realistically believe he'll win the event, either, but he shouldn't go out of his way to quash their hopes. Nevertheless, it sends a powerful warning to the rest of the field, that in order to wrest underdog status from him and his countrymen, it will have to be pried from his cold dead hands.

Even so, the locals had plenty to cheer about on an otherwise quiet opening day. Only two Frenchmen lost, and neither of those were expected to win. Adrian Mannarino has been in terrible form for some time now, and he was dealt a harsh lesson by the reliably exciting Fabio Fognini, who is returning to the site of his greatest triumph, and his most dramatic performance. His partner in drama from last year's production, Albert Montanes, fell in four sets to Juan Martin del Potro, who has something wrong with his knee, though not with his backhand, which was, according to Frew McMillan, 'quite terrifying'.

Nicolas Mahut scored a rare victory at Roland Garros by beating Andy Roddick, which is otherwise fairly commonplace. Afterwards the American touched on the issue raised earlier, remarking that a pro tennis player, even when he realistically has little shot at winning, should still make room for hope. His own situation has grown so dire, especially on this surface, that he didn't even have that, even when faced with Mahut: 'Coming into this, I didn't have much to prop myself up on.' The racquets he tossed to fans upon leaving Lenglen said it all. He just wanted to be done with it. At least on the grass he has belief and hope, which matter, for all that they are castles built on air.

Minor Records and Major Drama

French Open, Day Two

Kukushkin d. Gulbis, 6/4 7/6 5/7 2/6 6/4

For the first two and half sets of his match against Mikhail Kukushkin in the Roland Garros first round, Ernests Gulbis played like a man killing time, and making a hash of it, idling as studiously as one might before a pre-arranged appointment. Realising he'd tarried over long in the second set tiebreaker, he made up lost time by rapidly falling down 1/5 in the third. Kukushkin stepped up to serve for the match, reaching 40-0, and triple match point, without incident. The match wasn't televised, but I'm reliably informed that Gulbis' phone began to ring at this moment. He stalked to the sideline to answer it, ignoring the vexed inquiries of the umpire and his opponent. Raising his index finger for silence – the way only those born to privilege truly can – he conducted a brief staccato exchange with whoever had called him. The phrase, 'I don't like to be *disappointed*, Mr Black - make it happen!' was clearly audible. He then hung up, and strode furiously back to his baseline, prepared to receive serve. Kukushkin, nonplussed, glanced at the umpire, then his opponent, then froze. The look in the Latvian's eyes was unmistakable. Kukushkin occupied a seemingly impregnable position, but the torpid Parisian afternoon was still young, and Ernests Gulbis suddenly had nowhere else to be.

Gulbis won the next eight games – according to the ITF Rulebook, that qualifies as a spree – then level-pegged before taking a few more, thereby levelling the match at two sets a piece. He broke again to open the fifth set, and had a point for a double break. Kukushkin broke back, and by 4/4 both men looked spent, according to embedded sources. Gulbis called for the trainer. Depending on the treatment he received, it either worked or it didn't. Serving at 4/5, he discovered one last lousy effort, and was broken at love to lose the match. Having confounded our expectations of a perfunctory blowout, he then confounded our hope that one of the greatest fight-backs in the history of the sport could actually mean anything. At times like these it's difficult to assume Gulbis is anything but an instrument of the gods, sent to teach us the futility of all human endeavour. Or maybe he's just an ungovernable headcase. It was reported that Kukushkin lacked the energy even to celebrate the eventual victory. You may recall him surviving a similarly contoured match against Gael Monfils in Melbourne. Perhaps he's just used to it, and couldn't see what all the fuss was about. Elsewhere on the grounds, Fabio Fognini pursed his lips thoughtfully. Dramatically, the bar had just been raised.

Still, if it was the most dramatic men's match played today – there was a decent scare for Victoria Azarenka – it was by no means the only one. Kevin Anderson saved a handful of match points in seeing off Rui Machado 11/9 in the fifth set in a match held over from yesterday. The slight yet dreamy Machado led 5/2 in the fifth, though play was finally suspended at 7/7. Anderson, rejuvenated, came out swinging today, and connecting. Paul-Henri Mathieu recovered from a two set deficit against Bjorn Phau, winning the last few sets so comfortably that it became a victory procession for the rapturous onlookers. It's a nice change for Mathieu so late in his career, to discover what the other side of a two-set recovery feels like.

(WC) Baker d. Malisse, 6/3 7/6 7/6

Brian Baker defeated Xavier Malisse in straight sets, which was an upset only on paper. The disparity between their respective rankings is shrinking fast. Baker, at 27 just commencing his career, is clearly hungry to play professional tennis. He said as much afterwards. Malisse looks hungry for anything else. The talent is still there, and will be always, but it's hard to refute Federer's blunt assessment that the Belgian just hasn't worked hard enough. At the key moments today Baker was willing to work, although I suspect for him it feels nothing like work. He was merciless on Malisse's second serve, although the weakness of his own delivery made breaks hard to maintain.

(11) Simon d. Harrison, 3/6 7/5 6/4 6/1

Like Baker, Ryan Harrison is at the start of his career. There the common thread frays and snaps. Unlike Baker, Harrison makes hard toil look like drudgery, and like something he'd prefer to forgo. For the better part of two sets today, when it was all flowing freely, and Gilles Simon was stuttering distractedly, Harrison looked typically impressive. He stepped up to serve for the second set, at which point the French weather and the French crowd and French man up the other end conspired to make it a chore. Simon lifted with the breeze, and Harrison continued to believe he could simply hit through the court at will, a belief that somehow never wavered in the face of mounting contrary evidence. He threw a few tantrums, and looked like he had in losing to Marin Cilic at the US Open last year. His first round loss to Andy Murray in Melbourne had been altogether different, and I'd hoped it betokened a realisation that lots of other players are better than him, and that he should never expect to win. That day he played like a man determined not to lose, but not this day. At his age, imagine what Wilander, Chang, Hewitt or Nadal would have done. Perhaps there's an issue with inadequate fitness, but there's also such a thing as too much belief, and he doesn't have the game to render a tough opponent who has found their range immaterial, the way Sampras could, or Raonic can. Baker will face Simon next. It will be fascinating to see how that plays out.

(3) Federer d. Kamke, 6/2 7/5 6/3

Federer beat Tobias Kamke in straight sets, but it didn't always feel like it. It felt like a mess, although Federer's fans can console themselves that it was a first round, and that he only played as well as he needed to. This kind of thing sounds comforting when he wins, but hollow when it prefigures a subsequent loss. Kamke is a tremendously entertaining player – his five set tussle with Dolgoplov in Melbourne was electrifying – and I sometimes wonder how his ranking hasn't climbed higher. It was a question that begged answering at various stages of today's match, as he stood up on the baseline and bullied Federer about the court, no minor feat considering his size. (Fans of the spry German will doubtless recall the way he dismantled Tomas Berdych a few years ago in Basel.) Sadly, he spent the rest of today's match answering that question. Too often he was broken at love: he has the capacity to toss away fistfuls of points at a time. Federer was sloppy – the complete array of late-career tricks was on offer, from shanks into the crowd, to duffed putaways, to mental sojourns on match points – but, inevitably, he was still Federer.

Minor records thence hove into view, the way they often do when Federer takes to the court these days. With this victory he becomes the first player to win at least 50 matches at all four Majors. He also ties Jimmy Connors as having the most wins at

Grand Slam level in the Open Era. In the second round he'll face Adrian Ungur, who later upset a lackadaisical David Nalbandian. There's a pretty good chance Federer will break Connors' record.

Spread Too Thin

French Open, Day Three

This year, more than ever, the policy of sustaining the French Open's opening round over three days seems to have had the deleterious effect of spreading the excitement too thinly, guaranteeing that the genuinely great moments have remained too scattered to achieve critical mass, and therefore haven't cohered into an identifiable body. Sunday provided the most soporific commencement to a Major in living memory. Even Parisians appeared unaware that the event had started, or that the stadium courts had functioning entry-points. Although Monday had its excitement, little of it carried over to Tuesday. Today's only upset saw Alex Dolgoplov fall to Sergiy Stakhovsky (although amidst the conflagration of Serena Williams' exit it is perhaps disproportionate to speak of upsets at all, like lamenting a broken toe during the firebombing of Dresden). Even the expected results for the most part played out in entirely expected ways. None of the top four was troubled, especially Nadal who was charitable in permitting a free-swinging Simone Bolelli five games. But, inevitably, there were exceptions.

(8) Tipsarevic d. Querrey, 2/6 6/4 7/6 6/3

There was early chatter of Sam Querrey upsetting Janko Tipsarevic, but the fact that most of it originated from American commentators supplied the tip-off that chatter was all it was. Querrey struck the ball well – as he should, given his proportions – and the fast conditions helped, but the pronounced disparity in their respective rankings isn't accidental. Tipsarevic certainly isn't immune to upsets, and he remains the most vulnerable player in the top ten, but the time when he would check out quickly seems to have passed, for now. His game solidified noticeably upon breaking back in the second set, and from there merely staying close tested the limits of Querrey's form. By the beginning of the fourth set, Tipsarevic could see as well as everyone else that the American's legs had gone.

(Q) Haas d. Vollandri, 6/3 0/6 6/4 6/4

Tommy Haas' decision to endure qualifying (forced upon him by the tournament's refusal of a wildcard) was quite laudable, especially for those of us who've cleared 30, and believe we shouldn't therefore be immediately harvested for our organs. Haas, his spleen

mellower in its advanced years, is proving there's life to be had beyond that age even for professional tennis players. Others have proved it already, but few of them have been quite as high profile. Vollandri is no spring chicken himself, but even in his brief prime he never had a game to match Haas, notwithstanding a truly execrable second set from the German.

Dimitrov d. Young, 7/6 6/1 6/1

There was a similar gulf in class between Grigor Dimitrov and Donald Young, and the dynamics of the match were vaguely familiar, in that Dimitrov punished the American's second serve without mercy, launched plenty of attractive one-handed backhands – that wing looks surprisingly strong against weak opponents – and generally hustled Young from the court. Young intimated via the enchanting medium of endless complaining that the difference between them had something to do with his own form, but the fact that his most extravagant groans were inspired by Dimitrov's good shots landing in gave the game away. Young is now 2-13 for the season. Apologies to American readers, since he's apparently a big deal over there, but this record doesn't feel wrong. Speaking of attractive backhands, Dimitrov will next face Gasquet, and can therefore witness his own future from extreme close range.

Paire d. Ramos, 7/6 6/4 6/7 6/3

The French famously have a habit of producing eccentric tennis players, for all that I'm not convinced they boast a higher proportion of eccentric citizens. There are countless examples, although I suppose for the true exemplar Fabrice Santoro still grabs the gateaux. Benoit Paire is hardly cut from the same cloth, but that's the curious thing about all these French weirdos. They're all genuinely strange – there's nothing self-conscious or cultivated about it, despite what you'd expect from the nation that nurtured Cocteau and Satie – and no two are alike. Paire, whose raffish facial hair technically qualifies him as a 'beardo' – is arguably the sport's foremost exponent of the inside-out backhand. He strikes it well, and he strikes it hard. Most interestingly, he strikes it often. The lengths he will go to in order to run around his forehand are extreme. Today he struck inside-out backhand winners from inside the forehand tramlines. Otherwise, he conducted entire rallies using only forehand slices. He went on dropshot benders that recalled Albert Portas. About the only thing he can't do is land first serves with any regularity. The final point of this highly entertaining match was somehow typical, despite being the only example of its type in the entire match. He served, Albert Ramos returned, whereupon Paire wrong-footed him with a *crosscourt* forehand dropshot – that shot is almost exclusively played inside-out – which Ramos scrambled to and shovelled

up the line. Paire was there, and launched a backhand drive-volley from just inside the baseline. Winner. Match. Quite incredible.

The following players all won in straight sets, with almost none of the sets being close: Rafael Nadal, David Ferrer, Andy Murray, Mikhail Youzhny, Dimitry Tursonov, Denis Istomin, Robin Haase, Marcos Baghdatis, Eduardo Schwank and Florian Mayer. Aside from those who are fans of any or all of those guys – and who are understandably willing to find plenty to interest them even in crushing victories – that adds up to a lot of hours of non-competitive tennis. But not so many that we needed an extra day.

Perfect Cadence

French Open, Day Five

Fognini d. (28) Troicki, 6/2 3/6 4/6 6/3 8/6

Fabio Fognini saved two match points while defeating Viktor Troicki today - 8/6 in the fifth set - and it is reasonable to suppose he played the second of them with a cracked racquet frame, having hurled it to the court upon conceding the previous point. This has traditionally signalled the moment at which Fognini grows interested, so it proved something of a surprise when he subsequently broke for 7/6, and then served it out at love. Those of us who had hunkered down for an epic could be forgiven for feeling a little short-changed. Where was Troicki's counter break, amidst a flurry of foot faults? No cramps? Even the self-directed tirades, for all that they roamed through the more florid regions of several romance languages, were mostly delivered *sotto voce*.

If fans cannot rely on The Fog to instigate a melodramatic and farcically-extended classic, wither should they turn? Who remaining in the draw even had the pedigree? A short time later John Isner strode onto Chatrier, where he would remain for over five and a half hours. Denied the services of Nicolas Mahut, who is scheduled to face Roger Federer tomorrow, Isner had instead enlisted the equally unlikely Paul-Henri Mathieu. When Big John really has time to kill, it seems only aging also-ran Frenchmen need apply, although once you've met those basic requirements it's apparently a case of first come, first served-at. (Arnaud Clement, busily terrorising ball kids, missed his chance by mere hours. Utterly despondent, he immediately announced his retirement.)

(WC) Mathieu d. (10) Isner, 6/7 6/4 6/4 3/6 18/16

By now you doubtless know how it turned out. Doing anything more than recounting the scores does any of the first four sets too much justice. Each provided a timely reminder – timely is almost certainly the wrong term – that Isner's classics are not to be

delectated for their individual moments, but only appreciated in their totality, like an extended work by Philip Glass. No one emerges from one unchanged, but nor do they necessarily recall that delightful bit in the third hour, unless it's years later, during therapy. Steve Tignor, who was courtside, correctly suggested that a match like this one evokes the fleeting transience of human existence. He should try doing it through a frigid Melbourne night. Somewhere in there May became June, and it felt like it. A month had passed.

The match lurched to a kind of life in the fifth set, likely a ghastly simulacrum. Those parts of Mathieu's career not taken up with surgery and recovery have been mostly devoted to establishing his reputation for gagging at the big moments. He kicked things off nicely in the 2002 Davis Cup final, when he blew a two set lead – in Paris – to Mikhail Youzhny in the fifth and deciding rubber. For disappointment that's hard to top, which isn't to say he hasn't tried to at least match it in the long decade since. Still, he appears to have turned a corner of sorts. Two days ago he recovered from a two set deficit for the first time. Today he held his nerve admirably. Isner, it turns out, should have vetted his aging also-ran Frenchmen a little more closely.

When a fifth set lacks a tiebreaker – as it should – it's inevitable that fitness becomes decisive, especially on clay. At 6'9", Isner will never be able to run all day. But Mathieu is still in the preliminary stages of his latest comeback, so there was no reason to believe he could either. Blunt weariness was thus a given, but for a wonder it was the Frenchman who was holding more comfortably, and whose groundstrokes retained their sting. Isner should have been taking bigger cuts on his return games, undoubtedly, but Mathieu was admirably steadfast. And he was making Isner toil mightily to hold, doing everything he could to counter the American's beastly kick to the ad court. I don't wish to imply that the tennis was suddenly breathtaking. It wasn't, but at least Mathieu's break points were now match points, each holding out the promise of a final perfect cadence. Alas, this was Glass in a capricious mood, and every time the dominant chord would resolve imperfectly, sliding cruelly away, back into the churning minimalist coda. Isner saved six match points.

He didn't save the seventh, and Mathieu looked slightly less elated than stunned as Isner's final forehand drifted wide in the gathering murk. He too had given up hope of an end. His feet were in terrible shape – one of his toes is broken – and he must have been close to collapse, but he looked numb rather than wounded. They both did, but Mathieu, once it had sunk in, was the one permitted to raise his leaden arms aloft for the delirious crowd.

If we weren't constantly reminded, it might be easy to forget that Isner was considered an outside chance to take the French Open this year. I was never sure whether this brazen assessment was based more heavily on his stirring Davis Cup efforts against Switzerland and France or his heroic first round loss to Nadal here last year. Either way, he has emphatically failed to impress since returning to Europe. It is with some dismay that we must admit that a strong run at the US Men's Clay Court Championships back in Atlanta does not *necessarily* guarantee triumph at Roland Garros. I suppose we had to find out sometime. Juan Monaco, who will face Milos Raonic in a few days, retains some hope it doesn't therefore guarantee failure. Isner looked quite upset at this discovery, although initially his analysis remained measured, as though he was reading it from a coaching handbook: 'I felt like I got caught in patterns that weren't idea for me.' The issue, he suggested, was one of confidence. Fair enough. Then, finally, his disappointment broke through: 'I am just going to go home. I don't want to think about tennis right now.'

Mathieu has been denied the same luxury, for all that he must crave it at some level. Unfortunately, he is already home, and he won't be granted the freedom of oblivion. He must do it again in a few days, much of which will be spent in an ice bath, traditionally a difficult – although not impossible – place from which to savour victory. Whether that victory will prove Pyrrhic is the question. Fabio Fognini knows all about those, as does John Isner. Now Isner knows that they're still better than a loss.

De Profundis

French Open, Third Round

'Pain doesn't kill me. I kill the pain.' These are the inspirational words that the generally likeable Svetlana Kuznetsova has inscribed into the flesh of her inner right bicep, thereby proving the adage that if you must subscribe to a solecism, you should at least do it in Latin. 'Dolor non occidatis me. Interficiam dolor,' has a certain ring to it – or at least the dull thud of obscurity – and at worst you could pretend that Seneca once uttered it, in a particularly uninspired mood. It has a vaguely Stoic quality to it, although Kuznetsova's motto sounds suspiciously like something a burly man once hollered at her in the gym, while she endeavoured to max the envelope at 110%. At least Janko Tipsarevic had the good sense to ink his left forearm with Dostoevsky, even if he inked it in Japanese rather than Russian, because he thought it looked cooler.

(6) Ferrer d. (27) Youzhny, 6/0 6/2 6/2

After comprehensively self-destructing against David Ferrer earlier today, Mikhail Youzhny might be tempted to find space for a tattoo saying 'Sorri', although given his history of self-inflicted punishment he might be more likely to chisel it into his own forehead. For now we'll have to settle for it scrawled onto the court surface with his shoe, early contrition for a match that was rapidly heading south. Ferrer proved once more that there are subtle gradations to 'solidity'. At the level he was operating at today, it even achieves a kind of virtuosity. He was almost impenetrable. Before the Russian applied his boot to the court, he applied his racquet to it with some force. Even the crowd seemed sympathetic. The 'Sorri' perhaps stemmed from gratitude at this moral support. It wasn't precisely on par with Gustavo Kuerten's giant heart, but it was a nice moment. Later Kaia Kanepi did inscribe a giant heart in the court, after finally seeing off Caroline Wozniacki. It was one of those days.

(17) Gasquet d. (Q) Haas, 6/7 6/3 6/0 6/0

It certainly was for Tommy Haas, who, up a set and level with Richard Gasquet in the second, probably felt like he was a decent chance of scoring the upset. He'd survived the qualifying draw in the back-lot, and here he was, battling it out in the third round on Lenglen. He then lost 15 games in a row, and it wasn't his fault. Gasquet, as he sometimes and temporarily will, became the world's best player. When Haas wasn't forced into error, he was merely feeding the Frenchman balls from which to crush winners, which Gasquet duly did. Gasquet was understandably proud of his performance afterwards, although he airily dismissed any suggestion that local hopes should be nourished by this. Like the rest of us, he knows from long experience that it never lasts. The godmode power-up is only ever temporary. He faces Andy Murray next, whom he beat in Rome a few weeks ago. The pain nearly finished the Scot off in the second round, but he appeared fine today, sporting a new tattoo: 'Virginia Wade doesn't kill me...'

Rafael Nadal still hasn't dropped a set on red clay this year, although he did permit Eduardo Schwank four games in one of them: a narrow escape. He'll play Juan Monaco in the next round, who eventually got past Milos Raonic in a decent five setter, one that was predictably determined by the serve. Monaco proved unbreakable. Despite recent heroics, or more likely because of them, Paul Henri Mathieu fell in five sets to Marcel Granollers, despite shinnying out of a two set hole. Both men looked pretty tired by the end, each fighting a desperate rear-guard action against 'the pain'.

Speaking of dropped sets, it's easy to get caught up in this. When Roger Federer won the 2007 Australian Open without dropping a set, it was the first time a Major had been

claimed so cleanly in over twenty years. Since then it's become rather *de rigueur* – Nadal has done it several times – and fans who've come to the sport in recent years can be forgiven for believing that such outcomes are normal. At the very least, we've grown accustomed to the top players cruising untroubled through the early rounds in straights. The fact that Federer dropped a set in his second and his third round has therefore been deemed newsworthy. It probably wasn't worth Tony Godsick quitting IMG over. Then again, like Nadal, Djokovic hasn't dropped any sets either. He was so comfortable in seeing off Nicolas Devilder that he carefully synchronised the inevitable thrashing to the fading light, as precisely as one might score a film.

(5) Tsonga d. Fognini, 7/5 6/4 6/4

Fabio Fognini was only sporadically engaged during his straight sets loss to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga yesterday, although when he was he proved characteristically engaging. On the heels of two five set victories, I'm not sure his undivided attention would have realistically altered the result, so much as momentarily delayed it. More importantly, he wasn't sure, either. In between strutting about, admonishing the crowd, tossing racquets and tormenting the umpire, there were a few excellent rallies. At one point he accidentally dropped his towel, and apologised to the ball kid. A small thing, but it marked a nice change from Guillermo Coria's day, when the Argentine would hurl racquets in their direction for a lark. Somewhere in the last decade Court Chatrier became child-friendly. Tsonga will never be an authentic clay-courter, but he was still pretty good, athletic and joyous, but also admirably focussed given his opponent's wavering application.

(18) Wawrinka d. (11) Simon, 7/5 6/7 6/7 6/3 6/2

Stan Wawrinka was arguably even better in seeing off a particularly passive Gilles Simon, and that's saying something. Across five sets, the Frenchman struck a commendable 23 winners, although this was narrowly eclipsed by Wawrinka's tally of 82. Most of Wawrinka's were produced off the backhand, among the sport's heaviest, and it felt like most of those were directed up the line, which even Simon couldn't bring himself to cover. Wawrinka will play Tsonga next - one to watch.

(7) Berdych d. (31) Anderson, 6/4 3/6 6/7 6/4 6/4

Kevin Anderson pushed Tomas Berdych to five sets, and for great swathes through the middle outplayed him handily. Momentum only shifted in the fourth set, although IBM's frankly useless Slamtracker was typically tardy in picking up on this. Perhaps it's ambitious to expect it to accurately reflect the flow of an actual tennis match, given that it can't even update the score in a timely fashion.

As ever when very tall men play, this viewer's perspective underwent a sharp revision, and everyone else on court began to look like a Hobbit. Berdych finished strongly, and has earned the anticipated fourth round with Juan Martin del Potro. This was the fourth round match everyone yearned for the moment the draw was unleashed – especially Federer – and there's no reason to think it won't deliver, unless the Argentine's knee flares up. Remember Delpo, your knee doesn't kill you. You kill your knee. Or something.

A Torrent of High Comedy

French Open, Day 8

(3) Federer d. (LL) Goffin, 5/7 7/5 6/2 6/4

Roger Federer today defeated David Goffin in four sets, and thereby moved through to his 32nd consecutive quarterfinal at Grand Slam level. This equates to eight years without failing to reach the last eight. However, through the early going in today's match there was, unexpectedly, a mounting anxiety that the streak would halt at 31. This would have represented a stunning deviation from the script, since Federer beating the unheralded Goffin was about as foregone as it gets, rather like beating Roddick in Miami had been.

I should declare, without further preamble, that Goffin boasts a fresh and youthful look. This is important, and was therefore made abundantly apparent even for those who didn't watch the match, but merely followed its progress on Twitter or Radio Roland Garros. The pre-existing stream of jokes about his appearance expanded rapidly during the hit-up – proving that Federer is wrong: hitting up *does* have a point – until it threatened to burst its banks; a flash-flood of dull gags, and similarly impressive for its ferocity and volume rather than the quality of its component parts.

Few of the gags were especially funny, even in the broad sense in which the term is used on the internet, whose denizens – if they are to be believed – are mostly laughing out loud, whether seated or while rolling on the floor. Many of these humdingers implied Goffin was on exeat from high school (ho-ho), that we hoped he'd handed in his homework (har-har), and did his mother know where he was (my sides!). My instinct was to raise the stakes by lowering the tone, but I refrained. Tennis is family entertainment, and no one ever gained anything by being risqué on the internet.

This deluge of high comedy eased markedly after Goffin broke Federer late to claim the first set, sealing it with a scathing forehand up the line. This wasn't going to script, and it was hard not to conclude that all the jokes about Goffin's youth had reflected a widespread assumption that he would pose no threat whatsoever to the third seed. It

also suggested few people had ever seen him play before. Like many others, I'd already seen Goffin play a few times, and therefore had a distinct advantage. I'd long since worked the lame jokes out of my system: 'If ever you need Tobey Maguire to seem old and wise, Goffin's the guy you'd cast as his sidekick.' I'd even progressed to the stage of trying to work out who he reminded me of. Back in Chennai, where he reached the quarterfinals, I concluded that he resembled Guillermo Coria, with a kinder face. This was reaffirmed when he opened today's match with a double-fault.

But if Goffin recalls Coria, he boasts Nikolay Davydenko's endeavour, hands and fearlessness. As with the Russian, these combine with admirable court-positioning to offset his modest height and slight frame. Throughout the first set, in which he was frankly the better player, it was arguably his anticipation that proved most significant. We now all know that his boyhood room was papered with images of Federer, but his performance today reflected countless hours watching his idol play. (Goffin, according to one of the few amusing tweets, had 'really done his homework on Federer', proving yet again that funny is all in the timing.) Conditions were heavy, but Goffin seemed to have little trouble hitting through them, and hustling Federer around the court. Whenever Federer tried to do the same he found his opponent already there with time to kill. Goffin's anticipation and foot-speed made the clay seem especially heavy for the Swiss.

Having said that, Federer was playing well within himself, perhaps partaking of the general belief that the young Belgian must sooner or later succumb to the moment. After all, Goffin didn't even qualify for this event, but slipped in as a lucky loser when Gael Monfils withdrew. For whatever reason, Federer did not play that first set (or the second) as imposingly as he should have, content to be solid, serve well, and permit his aura to work its trick. As a broad strategy it doubtless has merit – he knows how to win tennis matches – but on the level of each rally it meant he immediately ceded initiative to Goffin, who teed off on anything, and wasn't missing. Off the ground, I can barely recall Federer going for a line through the first few sets. Goffin hardly bothered going for anything else. His depth was incredible.

But just because a guy is a great mover is no reason not to move him. Federer's intensity lifted at the end of the second set, at precisely the moment Goffin's wavered, and the Belgian gifted up his first break of the match. Federer, as is his way of late, blew a few set points, and fended off a break-back point, but eventually closed it out. He then broke again to open the third set. Conditions seemed to be clearing, and quickening, although I'm inclined to think this owed largely to Goffin fading. He remained as quick as ever, but his anticipation, so preternatural through the early going, began to desert him. Federer was now lashing his forehands with greater pace and bite, and finding openings

everywhere. He settled into his ominous groove of 90 second service holds, and the set vanished quickly. The fourth set grew momentarily complicated after Federer once again broke early, as Goffin resumed his earlier attack, and threatened to break back. The point of the match ended with the Belgian bowing to the crowd. He later admitted that he hadn't really known what to do, but that it was a great moment and he'd consequently felt obliged to do something. He probably knew it was coming to an end, and seemed determined to enjoy himself. Federer eventually coasted to that end, sealing the final game with his mightiest forehand of the afternoon.

Immediately after the match, both players were subjected to an on-court that was both manufactured and awkward, the latter quality abetted by those in the crowd insisting that Federer and Goffin seal the love-in with a kiss. The Belgian was compelled, before a packed house in Lenglen, to reiterate just how much he'd idolised the fellow standing right next to him. Neither man failed to look embarrassed at this. Goffin would have been justified in pointing out that he was an actual professional tennis player, and could they all please stop patronising him, but he didn't. In the end, they settled for a friendly hug, after which Federer gave the youngster a fleeting pat on the head.

Elsewhere

Play was suspended overnight in the final two men's matches. In the first, Tsonga had consolidated a break in the fifth set, after Wawrinka rescued himself from a two-set well. In the second, del Potro led Berdych by two sets to one. That one can still go either way.

There was also a match between Djokovic and Seppi, although this was mostly without incident, except for when Seppi went up two sets to love and looked like knocking out the world number one. Italy's top player, battling exhaustion and a top seed who'd finally found some range, also ground his way back from a break down in the fourth, and was gallant in keeping the fifth close. As I say, barely worth commenting on. Luke Saville, the top seed in the boy's event, also fought back from a set and a break down. It was the theme of the day. Victoria Azarenka is right to be furious that she wasn't told.

A Fraught Definition

French Open, Day Nine

The definition of when the second week of a Major truly begins is contested, fraught and ultimately not very interesting, which is why I'm going to spend some time on it. Much like Douglas Adams' reciprivertexcluson – 'a number whose existence can only be defined as being anything other than itself' – the second-week of a Slam can seemingly

commence at any moment other than the tournament's second Monday, for all that this nominally kicks off the *actual* second week, although not at Roland Garros. Like I said, it's complicated.

In the case of the French Open, today actually marked the beginning of the *third* calendar week. With this in mind, Roland Garros' ongoing commitment to Sunday starts therefore bears reading as a subtle affirmative action policy towards lower ranked players. Apart from those few poor buggers who lose on the opening day, just about everyone therefore gets to experience the second week of a major, which is, I think, a special treat. The famous quote that you can't win a Major in the first week but you can lose one – commonly ascribed to the Greek philosopher Pete Sampras – grows more complicated by the realisation that you can't win the French Open until the *third* week. I suppose this is a minor matter, given the fact that unless you're Rafael Nadal, you can't win it at all.

The US Open's decision to conduct itself in hurricane season on a land-filled swamp creates further issues, which are compounded by the bloody-minded determination to spread the opening round over three days. Monday finals have become the norm, casting yet more doubt on Sampras' credentials as a theorist. It turns out fully half the season's Majors can't be won in the second week, either.

A persistent deluge through the middle part of last year's US Open saw the schedule back up disastrously, guaranteeing widespread discontent, and inspiring everyone to turn on Caroline Wozniacki when she sought but failed to lighten the mood. Andy Roddick, who'd gone to some effort to anoint himself the man of the people, expressed his profound joy at returning to the second week of a Major upon winning his second round match. He'd already brow-beaten the attendant media so thoroughly through the first week that no one retained the wherewithal to point out the absurdity of this. The Australian Open, meanwhile, splits the fourth round across the middle Sunday and Monday, thereby rendering a calendar definition useless. Wimbledon takes the middle Sunday off, and plays all round of 16 matches on the second Monday. This generates a spectacular day's entertainment, though it doesn't feel quite like the second week.

As I say: the definition is fraught and contested. My own definition of the second week has it commencing with the quarterfinals, and is based on the rationale that a reasonable cross-section of players would be pleased to have gotten this far. Lower-ranked players are invariably thrilled to reach this point, while the top-ranked guys aren't suicidal if they lose. Beyond that, the quarterfinals seem to mark the point at which the tenor of the tournament shifts. The upshot of this is that Roland Garros, after

nine full days of play, is about to commence its second week. With the exception of Tomas Berdych, everyone you'd expect to have survived so far has.

(2) Nadal d. (13) Monaco, 6/2 6/0 6/0

Some have done rather better than survive. Nadal has dropped only 19 games on his gambol to the final eight, his fewest in eight visits. He has never looked worse than unbeatable, and at times has looked considerably finer than that, particularly in the match against Denis Istomin. Undeniably, his draw has been easy, but no easier than Novak Djokovic's, and certainly tougher than Roger Federer's. I realise that this is a contested area as well; a frankly pointless debate as to whose inevitable progression to the second week has been the least inevitable, as though it really matters.

Each of them can only face the men placed before them, and Nadal has been merciless in making every opponent wish he'd been placed somewhere else. I've actually been looking for an opportunity to write about him, but frankly there isn't much to say about constant straight-sets drubbings, although I'm sure his fans would insist I'm glossing infinite nuance. I will say that I think the defending champion was more impressive against Istomin than against Juan Monaco, who played quite poorly, even for a guy who wasn't permitted to play well. Milos Raonic probably wouldn't have won a set, either, but I have no doubt he would have won more than two games, and provided Nadal with a sterner, and arguably more useful challenge.

(12) Almagro d. (8) Tipsarevic, 6/4 6/4 6/4

In the quarterfinals Nadal will, deep down in the sub-cockle area, be pleased to face Nicolas Almagro, who today took out Janko Tipsarevic in straight sets. As ever, Almagro looked like the world's best clay courter. That's precisely what he is until the better ones show up, which they have a habit of doing at any event grander than a 250.

Unfortunately for him these players are all still in the tournament, apart from Robin Soderling, who is apparently still in Sweden. Still, reaching the second week of a Major is a considerable achievement for Almagro, who generally prefers to lose early, so as to leave that week clear for planning his next campaign in Båstad, Nice or Buenos Aires.

(4) Murray d. (17) Gasquet, 1/6 6/4 6/1 6/2

Andy Murray's innate contrariness proved useful today, allowing him to harness the crowd's vicious and sustained disapproval, and push it deep down into the pit of his gut, where it was transformed into a force of untrammelled destruction. It took about a set and a half for this subtle gastric alchemy to occur. After that the hapless Richard Gasquet was scourged from the face of the court. It's worth finding some highlights.

Andy Murray was finally playing the way everyone says he should. This might be a cause for celebration, but we should bear in mind that Gasquet played the way he should against Tommy Haas the round before. No one plays the way they should all the time. It's a simple point, and it's amazing how easily it is forgotten. Murray will kick off his second week with David Ferrer. If Murray plays like he eventually did today, even Ferrer, festooned with canine metaphors, will fall quickly. We may therefore expect a dogged epic. Ferrer, for the record, beat Marcel Granollers. For a brief moment, around the grounds, blessed silence reigned.

(9) Del Potro d. (7) Berdych, 7/6 1/6 6/3 7/5

The top-half quarterfinalists were also decided. Federer will face Juan Martin del Potro, who he hasn't lost to since the latter's wrist returned from its gap-year (in which it bummed around South-East Asia and discovered Jim Morrison and Karl Marx). You might recall that the first three months of del Potro's season were largely constrained by hidings at Federer's hands, across four continents, although these were mostly in fast conditions. You might also recall that Federer had a hell of a time getting past the Argentine on his way to the 2009 Roland Garros title. Amidst all this recollection and reverie, del Potro's win over Berdych should not be forgotten. It wasn't a decisive win, but it was a win, and Berdych is by a considerable margin the finest player anyone has beaten so far in this tournament. The weather will also play a role. The forecast is for frigid, dull and dense conditions, not unlike Federer's quarterfinal loss to Soderling in 2010, in which the bigger man's capacity to penetrate the court proved overwhelming. Even ignoring his patchy form, Federer's fans are justified in their concern.

(5) Tsonga d. (18) Wawrinka, 6/4 7/6 3/6 3/6 6/4

Finally, Novak Djokovic will face Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. Anyone who tells you how that one will turn out is guessing. This time last year Djokovic was chasing history, and we were uneasily wondering how he might possibly lose a match ever again. History beckons once more, like an alluring Jezebel, but this year his march towards her feels far less assured. Faced with the looming and admittedly hunky Andreas Seppi, the world No.1 tripped on his trousers whilst removing his socks, and reeled heavily in to the dressing table. Whether the subsequent blow to head returned him to his senses remains to be seen.

In Tsonga he'll face a player who can handle almost anyone, whether he's in the mood or not. When he is in the mood, there are few more arousing sights in the sport, even as he's man-handling your favourite player, and rendering their best efforts irrelevant. Those for whom Tsonga *is* their favourite player – I'll admit he ranks among mine – will

be hoping for some of this tomorrow. The question will be which version of Djokovic shows up – they're differentiated by serial number – and whether Tsonga will maintain his commitment if and when the top seed lifts. Let's not forget his early contention that no Frenchman could win the tournament, and that this is his first trip to the quarterfinals here. He is into the second week of Roland Garros. Will that be enough?

Les Particules élémentaires

French Open, Day Ten

Much like other radioactive substances, the tournament draw at the 2012 French Open cleaves to a more or less fixed rate of exponential decay, weather permitting. After a slow start, the event discards precisely half its mass as charged particles every two days, although some of the particles are less charged than others. Paul-Henri Mathieu was an exhausted particle. Mikhail Youzhny was both enraged and contrite. With four half-life cycles complete, the original 128 participants had been reduced to just eight. Nuclear chemists traditionally call this point the 'quarterfinals', and I can see no reason to avoid the term. Eight remaining participants means four remaining interactions between them – called 'matches' – since it is an innate property that these particles must be paired before decay occurs, whereupon one of them is given off as heat (often in the form of hot air). With only four matches to get through in two days – neatly divided into two per day – this leaves considerable time in which these interactions can occur. The question therefore begs: why on earth would you schedule the day's two quarterfinals to be played at the same time?

At one point Roland Garros – via the miracle of Twitter – named the del Potro-Federer encounter its match of the day, but failed to explain why the match of the day was being played on Lenglen instead of Chatrier, and at the same time as a match between the world No.1 and the only Frenchman remaining in the draw. Now, I cannot cavil at the choice of courts. Novak Djokovic and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga certainly produced a spectacle worthy of the venue. Furthermore, the scheduling did throw up a few remarkable moments of simultaneity, the most exquisite coming when both Federer and Tsonga moved to match point at almost precisely the same moment. You don't see or hear that too often, and the roars from Chartier resonated almost perfectly through the two streams I had running. The vocal crowd on Lenglen loved Federer, even after he'd earlier directed some tough love back at them, but the swell from the main court built into a vast breaker, that then crashed across the grounds and through my speakers.

But, souvenir-value aside, match points in matches as big as this deserve to be appreciated in isolation, and the excitement was more cancelled out than augmented by trying to follow both. Federer later revealed just how distracting it had been, and how he'd requested that they stop showing constant updates from the other match on the Lenglen scoreboard. It should be said that those following the earlier women's quarterfinals faced an identical dilemma (both scheduled at the same time). In both cases the problem would have been ameliorated by putting the men's match on first on one of the courts. Not both, though, that would be foolish, although I wouldn't put it past the French Open to propose this as a solution. At least one could hope they've learned their lesson for tomorrow's remaining quarterfinals. It therefore no surprise to note today's schedule will be reprised perfectly.

(3) Federer d. (9) Del Potro, 3/6 6/7 6/2 6/0 6/3

For fans of Roger Federer, today's quarterfinal with Juan Martin del Potro began in a depressingly familiar fashion, recalling the loss to Robin Soderling at the identical stage of the same tournament two years ago. For fans of del Potro, the deflating familiarity came at the end. As their man, easily the better player through the early going, began to wilt noticeably in the third set, and then fade entirely as the fourth wound on, the comparison to the 2009 semifinal became unavoidable.

It was only gradually that I began to grasp Federer's sophisticated rope-a-dope strategy in this match. In glacial conditions, he was never going to be able to hit through the court as effectively as del Potro, who, like Soderling, can effectively hit through a wall. As with the Rumble in the Jungle, when Ali allowed Foreman to wear himself out from punching him so much, Federer was icily content to let the Argentine – similarly proportioned to Foreman – grow exhausted from landing so many lusty body-blows.

I'm being facetious, of course. Icy is the last thing Federer was today, and through the initial stages, a strategy was the last thing he had. I can hardly recall him looking and sounding so fired up since . . . well, since the 2009 US Open final, when he was famously beaten half to death by del Potro's haymakers. At one point he bellowed 'Shut-up!' at someone in the crowd after they'd allowed their excitement to spill over during the rally. 'I was (you know) sometimes upset,' he remarked afterwards.

It's hard to know quite what to make of del Potro's insistence later that his knee injury wasn't crucial, although he maintained this line under persistent probing, and suggested that the frequent appearances from the trainer were just to loosen the taping. Pressed to deconstruct his drop-off, he evocatively credited Federer lifting – 'I feel his ball more on the baseline', which seems like a clear example of the hindrance rule – abetted by his

own serve deserting him. Certainly he served worse after the first two sets, but up until that point he had seemed quite dominant when the ball was in general play, and even from neutral positions he was generally the one forcing Federer to defend. It's hard not to chalk his response up to gracious disingenuousness – he really wasn't pushing off that side well – but he did remain indefatigable on the matter, even when obliged to explain himself at least four times.

Still, it's also undeniable that Federer's game picked up. For perhaps the first time in this tournament, he began to look like himself in those last few sets. The first couple of sets saw him launch innumerable forehands long, and every backhand he sought to redirect up the line found a portion of the net well below the top. From the third set those shots found the court, even through a persistent drizzle that rendered it ingratescent. He began to mix up his first serve – mostly mixing 'in' ones with the 'out' ones he'd been discontent to use earlier – and generally resembled the guy who's beaten del Potro four times already this year. For two sets, this was a better del Potro than that, but then it was a much worse one. I don't know what this means for Federer's upcoming semifinal against Novak Djokovic.

(1) Djokovic d. (5) Tsonga, 6/1 5/7 5/7 7/6 6/1

A glance at the score line tells you a lot of what needs to be said about this match. The outer sets were dominated by Djokovic, but the middle three almost elevated it into a classic. When Tsonga dished up the early break in the second, it really didn't look like heading that way. Djokovic played an imperious first set, but then he's developed a habit of doing that a bit this year. Think back to Miami, or even Rome. In contrast to last year, he has frequently thudded back to earth in the second. (Last year he only returned to earth in October.) Tsonga broke back in typically enterprising fashion, and to his credit he never really stopped playing that way. Djokovic grew perceptibly anxious at the end of the next two sets, either spraying errors or tentatively allowing his opponent to impose himself. If there's one thing Tsonga is willing to do – I'm sure there are lots of things – it's impose himself.

It's hard to say enough about Djokovic's composure when facing match points, although it's a simple matter to say little of use. Tsonga had four match points in the fourth set – they marched in, two by two – and on each Djokovic discovered a typically mordant calm. Federer has twice proved in New York that two consecutive match points is not enough against Djokovic, a seemingly absurd concept that was nevertheless lent weight in Paris last year, when he needed three in a row to secure the win. There are arguably better players at saving match point, but Djokovic is the finest I've ever seen at

surviving a pair of them. Admittedly, this is a highly specialised skill. It is quite useless to, say, trauma surgeons. But for the world's highest ranked male tennis player, it certainly has its value, which we can determine by adding up all the prize money and prestige he would have foregone without it. Djokovic himself could offer little explanation afterwards, and it's not his job to. For myself, I maintain what seemed apparent at the US Open last year. His calm seems to stem from a deep gallows detachment. People who are very good at confrontation will perhaps recognise it, the way, at the uttermost end-point, all the concern and anxiety seems to evaporate, leaving a near-giddy sense of anticipation and delight.

Giddy delight almost perfectly describes how Tsonga didn't feel afterwards, although even he could barely parse what he was feeling: 'You want to break your racquet. You want to shout. You want to cry. You want to laugh and say, 'Oh come on, that's a joke. How could I lose this match?' You want to wake up.' He knew that, as calm as his opponent was, he'd had a shot on those match points, particular that passing shot. He declared it to be the hardest loss of his career. I suspect, deep down, he really did believe a Frenchman could win the French Open.

For Djokovic, I don't know what this means for his upcoming semifinal against Federer, except that the Swiss will need at least three match points to win, since anything less plays right into the Serbian's hands. Hopefully the tournament will schedule them both to play at the same time.

By His Design

French Open, Day Eleven

Tuesday's French Open quarterfinals provided a pair of matches that were about as fascinating as discerning tennis fans could reasonably hope for, although those same fans might reasonably query the wisdom of scheduling both to be played simultaneously. Aside from this continuing and daft experiment – the apparent goal of which is to neatly halve the number of potential viewers – Wednesday's quarterfinal matches turned out nothing like that. No match points were saved, and neither of the eventual winners ever fell behind more than a game. Yesterday's arrhythmic and barely tonal bloodbath gave way to a stately procession; a pair of sunny sarabandes whose intricate figurations initially delighted but ultimately failed to disguise the unyielding onward pulse below. I presume this won't bother fans of Rafael Nadal or David Ferrer one bit, particularly as these fans are often (although not exclusively) one and the same. Perhaps it's a Spanish thing. Perhaps it's something else. I'm open to theories.

In any case, predictably or otherwise, the upshot is that the Roland Garros semifinal line-up is complete. Actually, I'll concede that predictable *is* the appropriate term here, since, as usual, the last four includes the top three players in the world. Nadal will play Ferrer, and Djokovic will play Federer. For all that their journeys along these roads have not always been stately - Federer and Djokovic have seemingly clashed with bandits at every turn - there is an immutable sense that all of the roads have led here, even those snaking away from Rome. Indeed, it's worth remembering that the Foro Italico witnessed precisely the same semifinalists, up to and including David Ferrer. Who can reasonably question Rome's value as a form guide?

If today's quarterfinals aren't destined to abide in the collective memory, they still cleared up a few lingering questions. We now know that Andy Murray really did have the toughest draw out of the top four, although Juan Martin del Potro had the toughest draw out of anyone, excepting perhaps Simone Bolelli. We discovered that Murray plays better when the crowd hates him, which is something for the fanatics at Wimbledon to bear in mind. There is a rumour that Virginia Wade is organising a cheer squad. And we found out that Nicolas Almagro can time the ball really sweetly from both sides, even a sodden ball in dull conditions, although further viewing revealed that he cannot keep doing it for nearly long enough.

(2) Nadal d. (12) Almagro, 7/6 6/2 6/3

Indeed, today proved to my satisfaction that Almagro will probably never beat Nadal on clay. By his own admission he 'played one of the best matches he can play against Rafa', but he was never all that close to taking a set, and Rafa was hardly at his best. Post-match analysis has focussed on Almagro's squandered break-point at 3/3 in the third set. But if your diciest moment comes in the middle of a set, when you have a two set lead, you're not realistically in much trouble. I can't recall thinking at the time that a break to Almagro at that moment would guarantee anything beyond the opportunity for Nadal to break him back, an opportunity so far denied him. For once I agreed with the otherwise pointless Slamtracker (think of the man-hours that went into that thing): the momentum was all with the defending champion, who was defending as only he can. I was vaguely reminded of those who talked up Jürgen Melzer's chances at last year's event, based on the fact that he'd *almost* taken a set from Nadal the year before. Somehow, in spite of this immaculate pedigree, Melzer lost in the second round.

Nadal's victory also gave us a useful example of the shortcomings of highlights packages, proving once again that trying to gauge the quality of a match from its best moments is about as worthwhile as settling down to read *Great Conversations from*

Middlemarch, or *Proust's Top Ten Recollections*. Actually, that's not quite correct. It is the conceit of mainstream tennis coverage that in order for a tennis match to be sufficiently dramatic, or 'meaningful' – here a meaningless term – it must therefore have a readily-defined narrative. The truth is that it mustn't, and the drama, as I've suggested before, is essentially symphonic rather than literary. (Of course, not all matches provide great drama, but then not all symphonies are by Mahler or Beethoven. Most of them are awful, and mercifully forgotten.)

A highlights clip is more like a short medley of tunes than a symphony, which entirely misses the point, since a masterpiece cannot be distilled by just plucking out the catchy bits. Melody is only part the charm, and in rare cases none of it. Some of the most dramatic tennis matches are relatively highlight free. Even as ESPN conceives of tennis – as facile and programmatic – the highlights package heightens the spectacle but warps reality, and instils the false belief that a great match is merely the sum of its best parts, when all too often the opposite is true. Watching winners chained end on end can certainly be diverting, but without context they reveal little about how a given encounter actually unfolded. Here endeth the rant.

The metric has yet to be devised whereby today's quarterfinal between Nadal and Almagro could be considered a great match. I watched it unfold in something like real-time, with only a brief delay to catch Almagro's potential nipple-slips and for my stream periodically to insulate itself against the rigours of global travel. I've since watched a highlights package, which mostly showcased Almagro striking the ball with rare authority and Nadal retrieving desperately until his lower ranked compatriot buried a winner into the court he had lovingly prised apart. These points were very occasionally punctuated by Nadal contriving a scintillating winner from a hopeless position.

Nevertheless, the score-line informs us that Almagro actually lost the match, which therefore tells us that he missed the court rather too often, or that Nadal probably wasn't in hopeless positions as frequently as one is led to believe. The score-line therefore says more than the highlights do, which really only reveal the astonishing information that when the world thirteenth best tennis player hits the ball as well as he can onto the lines, he is almost unbeatable. The real match took considerably longer, and was mostly decided by Almagro's inability to return serve with any consistency – a fatal shortcoming in sluggish conditions – and the necessity for him to immediately exert control in every rally, and then maintain it almost indefinitely. If he didn't, Nadal would, because he can.

The truth is that Nadal's capacity to produce outrageous winners from impossible situations is no more fundamental to his perennial success than Djokovic's ice-veined recklessness while match-point down is to his. Both are handy attributes, to be sure, and as I suggested yesterday, without it Djokovic's continuing steeplechase towards history would have foundered at the second fence. But this is not how either man wins most matches. By my count, Nadal has now claimed 48 consecutive sets on red clay, dating back to last year's Davis Cup final. He has done this by controlling the court, not through his undoubted virtuosity when forced off it. Most of the sets weren't close, and this is by design. His design. He might not have been at his best today, but you can be sure that it went just how he wanted it to.

Scarlet Billows

French Open, Day 13

(2) Nadal d. (6) Ferrer, 6/2 6/2 6/1

(1) Djokovic d. (3) Federer, 6/4 7/5 6/3

By the time a tennis tournament has been reduced to just four men – continuing with my nuclear chemistry theme from the other day, I will term this point the semifinals – one's idea of what constitutes an entertaining day's play mostly becomes a matter of perspective. Earlier in the event there's enough going on that even if the match you'd been anticipating turns out to be a damp squib, there will inevitably be fireworks elsewhere. (If Fabio Fognini is still about, there's bound to be a Roman candle.) But when there are only two matches, played consecutively on the same court, what you see is what you get. When you don't get to see much, you're apt to feel some disappointment, even as you mouth mute praise that the matches at least aren't being conducted simultaneously. As I say, however, 'much' is here a debated issue. I have little doubt fans of Rafael Nadal found the experience worthwhile, even as they graciously observed a moment's silence for his opponent.

At other majors, such as the Australian Open, the two semifinals aren't even played on the same day, which makes a ticket to either of them a very expensive way to watch a blowout, if that's what eventuates. 2007 was a good example of this. The second semifinal saw Fernando Gonzalez demolish Tommy Haas with the most terrifying display of ball-striking since . . . well, since Roger Federer inflicted one of the sport's most notorious beat-downs on Andy Roddick the night before. For fans of Federer and Gonzalez, it was naturally money well spent. For those hoping for a more engaging contest, it was all over rather too fast. I have little statistical justification for this, but

I've always felt the semifinals of a major are often its best matches, and so the disappointment when they turn out to be anything but is compounded. Again, your mileage will vary. A tournament is supposed to build towards something. ESPN's coverage is based on the assumption of a story arc. This perhaps explains why ESPN have given up and gone home, out of sheer disgust. NBC have stuck around, though I'm not alone in wishing they hadn't. John McEnroe sounded so bored he was almost fascinating towards the end of the second semifinal. World fame has insulated him from this sensation for too long, apparently. He unleashed tedium as though he was rediscovering it.

Anyway, the long and short of it – let's be frank, the short of it – is that Nadal reduced David Ferrer to his constituent elements with frightening efficiency, and often faster than my bleary eye could follow. At one point he fell on his bottom, took the time to wipe his hand on his shorts twice, and still won the point. In all he won 83 points to Ferrer's 48, and, as a percentage, won more points on return than Ferrer won on first serve. Jim Courier remarked that Ferrer needed to play recklessly. Judging by his uncharacteristic quantity of errors he was already playing recklessly, or maybe just badly. Any more recklessly and he would have lost even more rapidly, had that been possible. The world No.2 was just incredibly good at almost every facet of the game that matters, although his penmanship remains otherwise sup-par. I can hardly recall him moving with this kind of easy assurance since 2008. He will almost certainly win the final. It was Ferrer's first Roland Garros semifinal, and it was an experience he won't ever forget. Trauma is peculiar that way.

A few hours later Novak Djokovic somehow fashioned a straight sets win over Federer out of a pair of train wrecks, proving, yet again, to be a master at constructing affordable art out of found objects. Federer led by a break in the first two sets, except for the second one, when he led by two breaks. Then he was broken back in about 35 seconds, and then again more slowly. Then he broke again to lead 5/4, thereby earning the privilege of serving for the set. It was about that confusing, a tangled mess of missed chances. There was something wrong with Djokovic's leg or back or breathing, and as a consequence he was playing more aggressively, the way he did in last year's Rome final, or the fourth set of the US Open final. Federer displayed great variety in his utterance of the phrase 'Come on', especially through the first three games, as it crescendoed from a menacing rumble to a sforzando exclamation upon gaining that crucially unimportant second break. Until this moment, he was really into it. Upon blowing the second set for the sixteenth time, he seemed to lose a measure of interest, taking the crowd and the commentators with him. He fell down an early break in the third, and Matt Cronin on Radio Roland Garros proffered the amazing opinion that

Federer would now find it very difficult to win the French Open. This was hard to fault for accuracy.

In the end Djokovic ran away with it. It transpired that those who had hoped for a classic, based on last year's masterpiece, were revealed as being prone to wishful thinking. I confess I was among them, despite the fact that neither Federer nor Djokovic had played at all well so far in the tournament. Even Mahut and Isner, with a radio antenna perched atop his lofty frame, could not provoke lightning to strike a second time, so what hope did a pair of amateurs like Djokovic and Federer have? It was still disappointing.

In the final Djokovic will endeavour to become the first man since Rod Laver to hold all four majors at the same time. Nadal will attempt to win his seventh French Open title. Naturally, we have all known about this for weeks. The prevailing narrative is now that this was the final we all apparently wanted (except for those who didn't), since neither of these respective records would mean quite as much if this pair didn't have to face each other. We can toss some 'unstoppable force – immovable object' metaphors into the mix for good measure. There's also some stuff about Nadal getting revenge for past major finals. So now we have a revenge tale between titans that was destined to occur. That's narrative. Where's ESPN?

On Place, and the Holding Thereof

French Open, Day 15

(2) Nadal leads (1) Djokovic, 6/4 6/3 2/6 1/2

Those expecting any kind of recapitulation of the unfolding, stuttering, lurching, despair-inducing, adjective-laden Roland Garros men's final between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal are bound to feel disappointment when I say that I am about to offer no such thing. Those with different expectations are probably going to feel disappointed in other ways, to an extent commensurate with the extravagancy of their hopes. Those who for whatever reason had been sure I was about to present a new Grand Unified Theory, if not a Theory of Everything, may well be the most disappointed of all. To all of you, I can only apologise. This post is merely a placeholder.

For those of you who've never visited the internet before (I'm flattered this was your first port of call) or even created anything more detailed than a shopping list, I'll explain that a placeholder is traditionally the thing you put in when you cannot think of the right thing at that moment, with the intention that you'll return later when inspiration is once

again flowing like pomegranate juice down your chin, which is my usual state while writing.

Douglas Adams argued persuasively - and posthumously - that the 'La' bit in 'Do-Re-Mi' is a classic example of a placeholder that somehow snuck through the entire production process without being fixed. All the lines in the song to some extent work, but 'La, a note to follow So,' really stands out as a temporary kludge. Less controversially, the original beta of *World of Warcraft* featured the character Captain Placeholder, who gained a cult following, and is spoken of with some reverence to this day. This may seem obscure, but when we consider that the total number of people who've played *WoW* is easily four times that of the population of New Zealand, I'd suggest that the least the Kiwis could do is save a spot for the good Captain on their next installment of *Dancing with the Stars*. Saving a spot for Captain Placeholder . . . did anyone else just experience a postmodern rush?

This post will no doubt achieve a similar cultural impact, with the key difference that once Nadal and Djokovic have eventually manufactured some kind of outcome - the weather outlook suggests this might be some way off - I will replace this post with a proper one. This current post will consequently vanish forever. Those who save it now will therefore possess a rare collector's piece, a true shard of folklore. It will be for the market to decide what its value will be, but I'll hazard that it might exceed a full sheet of Penny Blacks.

Furthermore, in that post - this post - is embedded a secret code that will one day unlock a hidden part of the website. Upon entering, the true fan will discover a surprise.

Spiders. Lots of spiders. In fact, *all* the spiders.

And one precious kitten.

Fade to black.

The Sun King

French Open, Day 16

(2) Nadal d. (1) Djokovic, 6/4 6/3 2/6 7/5

Rafael Nadal has won Roland Garros for the seventh time, which is the most times anyone has ever done it. There is presumably no one interested in tennis who remains unaware of this. It's a big story, and not lessened by the bigger story it forestalled.

Nadal eventually defeated Novak Djokovic in four sets, one of which was close, and all of which were long. Coming in at somewhere over twenty-three hours, I believe I'm right in saying this is the longest match these two have ever played, easily eclipsing the record they set in Australia, although there were admittedly one or two breaks due to bad weather conditions.

The longest of these breaks came between Sunday and Monday, when play was controversially called off due to total darkness. Parisians term this meteorological phenomenon *nuit* (literally 'not-daytime'). As bad weather conditions go it is even worse than rain. Had the finalists forged on through the not-daytime, valiantly and tentatively, blundering awkwardly through the shadows of the evening sun, it's a dicey question who would have been best served. My money was on Djokovic, who in staging a late comeback from two sets and a break down had already proven his ability to excel in the wet. Eight straight games and some fifteen thousand Nadal fans suffering simultaneous strokes bore testament to Djokovic's mastery. Then again, Nadal won his first Wimbledon at night, so who can say.

Those who've previously suggested that Nadal prefers slow conditions will hopefully absorb the lesson. He enjoys bouncy conditions, and the speed of the court, though related, is largely secondary to the amount of pop he can gain from it. His relatively poor indoor record speaks for itself. Recall what happened in Indian Wells, when the damp and wind drained the fizz from his groundstrokes, and he was cut to pieces. A similar thing happened on Sunday. After dominating a care-laden Djokovic for a touch over two sets, the drizzle established its incumbency, and the clay turned to mud (*boue*: another astonishing local phenomenon). The wet balls grew dense, and resistant to doing Nadal's bidding where before they'd been eager to oblige, rather like children when they enter their surly teenager years. Meanwhile, Djokovic's flatter groundstrokes and capacity to penetrate off the backhand proved telling. Battling a resurgent nemesis, his feet mired in sludge, and faced with recalcitrant equipment – 'You don't understand me!' the balls yodelled as they stormed out – is it any wonder Nadal began to lose his way? His camp looked livid. The Djokovic clan was in full voice.

When you're thus beset, the best thing you can do, really, is sleep on it. Everything looks better when the sun comes back. Having romped through the third set – thereby spoiling Nadal's chance at a third French Open without dropping a set – Djokovic broke to open the fourth, and began to look like spoiling any chance at victory at all. Nadal later admitted that holding for 1/2 was crucial. To Nadal's satisfaction, play was suspended, cruelly denying us the spectacle of night tennis. Djokovic was, unsurprisingly, willing to continue, but he didn't raise a fuss.

It wasn't quite a new Nadal that emerged this afternoon. In fact, it was the same one we'd seen through the first two sets: determined and reserved, and, by his standards, slightly unkempt. His first order of business was to retrieve the break. Djokovic, tentative when he needed to be bold, yielded it up with inadequate struggle. The players settled into a pattern of holds. Nadal was doing it easier – a few love holds late in the set implied the defending champion had the momentum – though Djokovic was doing enough. The tennis was better than the day before, but it still wasn't great, by any stretch. As the fourth set wore on, Nadal's backhand began to fall short and lose sting, and Djokovic, as he had in the US Open final, began to pound it until it cracked. For some reason he hasn't returned to that attacking strategy much this year, and he didn't stay with it today, for all that it mostly worked when he did. At 5/5, with Nadal serving, the match was poised. Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere – although later reports asserted it came from the sky – the sun burst through.

For no good reason, my mind immediately returned to another overcast final at a Major marred by weather: Wimbledon 2007. I recalled how in that match, at its most crucial moment, tied up in the fifth set, the sun finally broke free for the first time in the match, seemingly for the first time in days, cutting in low over the Centre Court stands, that year topless for the first and last time. That day Nadal – already a three time Roland Garros champion but still pursuing his first Wimbledon – was the better player for most of the match. Federer seemed to be saving break points in every other service game. Serving at 2/2 Nadal had only faced four break points across the entire match. Yet at that moment, as the oblique shadows sprang forth, Jimmy Connors remarked with the utmost perceptiveness: 'Do you have a little feeling here that Nadal's had his shot?' Under that sudden wash of light, Nadal would not win another game. Afterwards, the Spaniard would claim it as his most disappointing loss. A year later he would take the Wimbledon title in darkness, pierced through by a thousand flashes in the gloom.

That's where my mind wandered, deep in the fourth set during today's final, as the sun bustled in with sudden splendour, like *Le Roi Soleil*, momentarily overwhelming the polarising filters in the cameras. And I reflected upon how things change. This time, five years on, the sun was exactly what Nadal needed. Tight, pressed to 30-30, he surged, and constructed a mighty point to hold. For the second time, Djokovic was compelled to serve for survival. Typical ferocity moved him to 30-15. The unbidden thought came to me that this rendered it mechanically impossible for him to fall down consecutive match points in this game. This was a problem. 15-40 is when he traditionally hits his stride. (15-40 is his talisman. If he didn't have 'Nole' embroidered on his gear, he would have that.) An error brought the score to 30-30. A chain of three big forehands brought Nadal

to championship point. *One* championship point. As he had in Rome, Djokovic double faulted. His armature collapsed partially, and, head bowed, he ambled dejectedly to the net, there to patiently await the greatest clay-courter of them all.

The greatest clay-courter of them all spun to his family, collapsed to his knees, and bowed his forehead to the dirt. He quickly rose, freed his sodden hair, and jogged to the net, taking due care not to step on the service line. He was in the stands soon after that – lavish with the hugs – and then on the podium moments later, hoisting and nibbling the *Coupe des Mousquetaires*, which he received from Mats Wilander, who'd himself narrowly escaped the Eurosport commentary booth. This was, Nadal insisted, one of the most special moments of his career. It didn't sound like hyperbole. Indeed, compared to his endless dazzling smile, it seemed like an understatement.

This is Nadal's eleventh Major title, and his seventh at Roland Garros, from the last eight years. Robin Soderling remains the only man ever to defeat Nadal at this venue (or indeed in any best-of-five clay court match). Everyone else has lost, and most of them have lost very badly. For the third time, he has denied a reigning world No.1 the opportunity of holding all four majors at the same time, proving himself to be a final and insurmountable hurdle to achieving the rarest prize in the sport. I'm guessing this is some kind of record, too. Djokovic had won 27 straight matches at this level. But to win the necessary 28th he needed to become the first man to defeat Rafael Nadal in a Roland Garros final, to storm the very court of the Sun King.

The Grass Season

Such As It Is

The grass season, such as it is, has arrived.

Terre battue has, finally, given way to emerald sward, although in Halle the sward always looks at risk of being churned into muck. Although I'm partial to the event – I'd dearly love to see it elevated into a Masters – there's something about the arrangement and gradient of the stands that makes the court feel hemmed in and dank, almost mossy. Meanwhile across the channel at Queens the courts are so vibrant and verdant they throw the All England Club into shade. Suddenly Nicolas Mahut is winning matches, and not just against Andy Roddick. Ivo Karlovic is still losing them, but he's now doing so in the familiar triple-tiebreak format. Players are venturing to the net of their own volition, as often as twice a set, and the volleys are actually being punched through the court, assuming the proponents remember how, which almost no one does. It is glorious, and it will be over too soon.

However, there must be balance in all things. So with the elation of noting that Grigor Dimitrov actually contrived a straight sets victory comes my profound sadness at Mikhail Youzhny's decision to shave off his beard. There was no official explanation provided, although one can hazard that it was intended as radical penance for his abject performance at Roland Garros, where he was unmanned by David Ferrer. It's a way of making his 'sorri' clear on his face. You must earn the right to wear a beard like that, and once in place, you must forever prove yourself worthy of its cultivation. Or maybe it was itchy. It's still a shame, since his magnificent thatch gave me another reason to appreciate one of my favourite players. Happily, the fiery assurance with which he eventually saw off Alex Dolgoplov in Halle today gave me enough to be going on with. The pace with which he was redirecting backhands off slickly skidding slices merited applause even in isolation, but within the context of each point it induced one's heart to sing. His sunnily diffident smile afterwards, so at odds with the rapt sternness of his countenance during general play, was as ever joyous, even if it would have been more advantageously framed by a beard.

As I said, the grass season isn't long enough, and the preparation for Wimbledon is woefully inadequate. Unexpected support for this line of reasoning was masterminded by Ion Tiriac, who as ever works in nebulous ways. Many pundits felt that it was unreasonable to plonk a fast blue clay event into the schedule three weeks before the

red clay Major, reasoning that this would upset the natural flow of things, and fatally hamper the top players' preparations for Roland Garros. These fears seemed a trifle overblown when Nadal, Federer and Djokovic all reached the semifinals in Rome the following week, and in Paris a few weeks after that. You cannot have it both ways. Either two weeks isn't enough preparation, or it is. Furthermore, there were also several weeks of red clay before Madrid, and - aside from Yen-Hsun Lu and the Americans - every professional tennis player spends ample time on this surface in their formative years. By contrast, hardly anyone ever sees a grass court while growing up, and even as pros the exposure is limited to the two weeks before Wimbledon, and however long they last once there, which for most of them isn't very long at all. I think the preparation for Roland Garros is longer than it needs to be, while the preparation for Wimbledon is too short.

The upshot is that Wimbledon, ostensibly the flagship event in the sport, is nowhere near as good as it should be, and the best results are achieved by those who prove themselves the most adept at limiting the impact the grass has on their natural game. The top players have proven themselves to be the best at this. Related to this is of course the issue of the grass itself - slower and more tailored to baseliners - but I'm not going to go into that here. Even given the courts as they are now, I suspect that the standard of play could be much higher, and more imaginative, individualised and exciting, with a lengthier preparation. Those mid-tier players whose styles are suited to grass - players like Mahut or Petzschner - would have extra time to hone their specialised skills properly, which would in turn compel those ranked above them to adapt. Adapt is a revealing word here, but as it stands it isn't necessarily one to be proud of. Nadal is in Halle already, for which he is to be commended, since he has ample reasons not to be, and they haven't named a street after him yet. But really, he's not there to *master* grass court tennis. Like everyone else, he's there to adapt to it as quickly as he can, to limit its detrimental impact on his natural game.

There needs to be a grass court Masters.

A Modest Proposal

Halle, Semifinals

The finalists at both Queens and Halle have been decided, and the line-up is about what one might expect, assuming one has just emerged from a decade-long coma. (If you have, then allow me to be the first to apologise for Justin Bieber, and admit that it's a mystery how he became secretary-general of the UN. Also, check out that Old Spice ad, and know that when Michael Jackson died, he became a force of pure light who visits us

in our dreams. I think that brings you up to speed.) Roger Federer will face Tommy Haas in the Halle final, a match that will ultimately hinge on which player's walking frame can best negotiate the rutted and ruined baseline. The Germans have superior engineering, but the Swiss have precision, and Federer is notoriously easy on his equipment. Meanwhile at Queens David Nalbandian will endeavour finally to win a grass court tournament, after a decade spent falling just short. His previous grass final was Wimbledon 2002, and I remember that he beat Xavier Malisse on the way there. I note that he did the same this week in London. We may therefore assert with some confidence that Nalbandian cannot reach a grass final without beating Malisse. That's science. I should also add that in the final tomorrow the Argentine will face Marin Cilic, who was 13 in 2002, although he's older now. It's also horribly windy in Queens, which has severely affected the standard of play, especially Grigor Dimitrov's.

Before I get to the Halle semifinals, and therefore begin to treat this post with the gravity it merits, I will share one further brainwave, because I'm either drunk with power or flu medication. Wouldn't it be interesting if the eventual champions in Halle and Queens played each other, with the overall points adjusted such that the 'winner' received 1,000 points, and the runner-up 600. You can probably see where I'm going with this. Obviously there are serious issues – disastrous mash-up of seedings, draws, unfamiliar court for one of the finalists – but I wonder if it could be made to work, whether a kind of grass Masters event could be run across two separate tournaments concurrently.

(2) Federer d. Youzhny, 6/1 6/4

A mostly mighty Federer saw off Mikhail Youzhny in fairly quick time, until the end, which was momentarily delayed when the Russian, languishing hopelessly at 2/5 in the second, began to lash the lines with a reckless intensity worthy of Novak Djokovic. He broke Federer back to love, and then saved match points on his next service game. Tension aside, both guys seemed quite upbeat about it. Youzhny was grinning all over the place, although without his beard to soften it his smile is complicated, combining an unsettling intensity with childlike delight. Federer served for the match again at 5/4, and, following a moment's confusion, closed it out with a declamatory ace out wide. There were a few delightful backhand rallies, which is something of a specialty between these two. Tomorrow will be Federer's fifth final of the year, and he hasn't lost one yet.

(WC) Haas d. (8) Kohlschreiber, 7/6 7/5

In the final Federer will play Haas, who as far as I can recall was already staging comebacks back in 2002. There was never much doubt Haas would receive a wildcard

into this event, but it was touch and go whether he'd be granted one for Wimbledon. He has been, which is frankly excellent news, and he has further justified it by his efforts in Germany this week. Fans will recall Haas taking the Halle title during his last stirring and unlikely comeback, three years ago, upsetting Djokovic in the final. Whether Haas has much hope against Federer is up for debate, although history provides some clues. For the last two years the Halle champion has seen off the defending champion en route to the title. As precedents go I suppose it's not much, and Federer has long since exempted himself from such folly.

Today Haas beat the defending champion Philipp Kohlschreiber, which meant that, in terms of sumptuous backhand rallies, Federer and Youzhny merely dished up the entre. Indeed, it's rare to see four single-handed backhands in the final four of a tour event, although I imagine that a slick grass court like Halle's goes some way towards explaining it.⁸ A tight and high-quality first set eventually attained the tiebreak, which Kohlschreiber looked certain to take. He led 4-1, and Haas could only find the bits of the court outside the lines. But then it turned. An effort of will was all it took. Haas took the next point with a tremendous backhand return winner, and this appeared to grant him a modicum of momentum as he and his opponent traded ends. Kohlschreiber would only win one more point, and the elder German – a proto-Teuton given his antiquity – sealed the breaker with a service winner up the T. The second set proved to be similar to the first, which means that it was tremendously exciting attacking fast-court tennis from both guys. At 5/5, Kohlschreiber unaccountably, which is to say characteristically, fell apart, and Haas broke, then served it out to love.

Tomorrow's final could be one for the ages, or at least the over-thirties.

And At His Age

Queens, Final

(6) Cilic d. (10) Nalbandian, 6/7 4/3 default

When Tommy Haas – who I am contractually bound to point out is 34 years old – upset Roger Federer in the Halle final, you would have been forgiven for believing that this would ultimately constitute the day's most remarkable result. Perhaps you're a gambling type, and somehow laid money on it. I'm not here to judge. Through a set and a half of the Queens final the belief remained unchallenged and the bet remained safe. The tennis, which was alternately produced by David Nalbandian and Marin Cilic, was merely

⁸ My research department has informed me that the last time this happened was actually on clay, in 2009. So much for that theory.

adequate, and certainly not up to the lofty standard of last year's final, which had been one of the matches of the year. Then, at 3/3 in the second set, Nalbandian resumed his ongoing crusade against advertising hoardings, and inadvertently demonstrated that – for excitement and drama – nothing that occurs within the rules of tennis can quite compare with those rules being violently transgressed.

One of those rules, rarely invoked, is that you aren't allowed to kick officials. This holds true whether you do it unintentionally, as Nalbandian did today, or even whether you really want to, and apply for special dispensation beforehand. You probably know the story by now, and have thus already worked through your disappointment at the Halle final's demotion to subsidiary fascination. You may have even come to terms with your gambling loss. You might just be traumatised by the visuals. (If so, the ATP is providing a toll-free 24 hour helpline.) Having yielded up an easy break after laboriously breaking back in the previous game, Nalbandian lashed out with his boot – 'foot-punched', to get technical – at the Nike sign in front of the baseline line judge, whereupon it splintered, and the Argentine's foot made contact with the official's shin, messily rearranging a small portion of it. I could describe it in more graphic detail, perhaps with some Homeric verse thrown in for colour. Nalbandian, it must be said, looked rather less concerned than he might have, even as it became clear fairly quickly that the judge was a fighting chance to survive. He will, at worst, have an interesting scar with which to frighten the kinds of children who are frightened by small scars.

Of course, Nalbandian was immediately defaulted, in what is presumably the simplest such decision any referee has faced since Zidane sought to burrow through Materazzi's chest head-first, or since Barry Hall decked Brent Staker. In his defence, Nalbandian looked considerably more contrite than either Zidane or Hall had, or at least less disingenuous. He knew he'd done wrong. Cilic was awarded the trophy and is thus the new Queens champion. He looked bemused. Nalbandian was not awarded a runner-up trophy, and indeed will be stripped of all ranking points and earnings from the tournament so far. The crowd did not acquit itself well, although they were denied the use of a slow-motion replay, and their tickets can't have been cheap.

Nalbandian later conducted a press conference that was almost impossibly inappropriate, although he was careful to offer a perfunctory apology to the wounded official, whose name he had not bothered to ascertain. Having got that out of the way, it turned out he had an axe to grind with the ATP, who had earlier denied his request for carte blanche in all matters of on-court vigilante justice, and strayed off into a ramble about wet courts and other matters. The real surprise by this point was that he didn't bring up Kader Nouni. I like Nalbandian, and I love his tennis, but there's a time and a place.

Halle, Final

(WC) Haas d. (2) Federer, 7/6 6/4

The day's second-most interesting tennis match occurred in Halle a few hours earlier, and saw Tommy Haas record his third career victory over Federer, and his first since the Australian Open in 2002, during the German's third comeback. Today, he was utterly fearless, and no one watching failed to be moved as he hoisted the fancy green and gold tureen, especially Federer.

Initially, it didn't look likely. When Federer broke and held to open the match with rapid efficiency, it looked sadly like a mismatch, and as though the Swiss would be collecting his sixth soup-dish within the hour. Haas held on grimly in the next game, and you could sense the patronising smiles breaking open around the world, betokening a general sentiment of, 'well isn't that nice for him, and at his age. At least he won't be humiliated.' Somehow, the match was trending worldwide. Then Haas broke back following a sloppy game from Federer, and suddenly his service games were impenetrable. They stayed this way for the remainder of the match. Federer could barely get a look-in. Haas opened the tiebreak with a pair of nervous long forehands, which Federer, good buddy that he is, reciprocated. Haas powered on, unwavering in his aggression, and took the first set. The worldwide sentiment expanded. Now the fans were all thrilled that Haas had taken a set (and at his age), although it was a shame that Federer was going to be spending so much longer on court, and with only a week to rest up for Wimbledon. I don't think anyone really believed Federer wouldn't win by this stage. Much like that match with Roddick in Miami, sometimes these things are just obvious.

The point of the match, if not the tournament, came when Federer was break point down at 4/4 in the second, having blown about a dozen game points already. They conducted a scrambling all court affair, featuring passes, lobs (one played by Federer over his shoulder while running from the net), and a really misadvised drop shot. It gained Haas the vital break, and a chance to serve for the match, which was nice for him (at his age). He'd been holding to love for most of the set, although it was inevitable that he'd be tense. Considering the situation, he held his nerve admirably, and served it out at 30.

After Federer's final return plonked long, Haas turned to the crowd and nodded his head slightly, then kind of shook it a little as he jogged to the net, where he and his friend embraced for a bit, shooting the breeze amiably. It was a nice change from the usual antics of collapsing to the surface as though speared, tasting bits of it, or rending your clothes asunder. Subtly restrained, it was a lovely scene, and a late crowning moment

for one of the sport's great stories, for a great player whose body has always denied him his due. The curious contours of his career are nowhere better illustrated by the consideration that this is Haas's eighth *consecutive* final victory, and that the last time he lost in a final was to Andre Agassi in 2002. For those of us in our mid-thirties, who were otherwise resigned to the reaper's imminent visit, it's a reason to feel young again.

Rite of Passage: The Poling

The second week of the grass court season almost never sustains the excitement and intrigue of the first, especially when the first ends in a blood-haze of punctured shins. For all that I believe the grass season should be longer, I think, given the reality, most people just want Wimbledon to start by now. Some of the players seem to feel that way, including Richard Gasquet. Today's highlight was the news that Brian Baker has qualified for the main draw, thereby justifying or ridiculing Wimbledon's denial of a wildcard, depending on your point of view. Today's lowlight was the hopeless match between Fabio Fognini and Bernard Tomic at Eastbourne, which didn't have to end the way it did, and for a long time didn't look like ending at all.

But in lieu of talking about that, I'm going to travel back twenty-three years to a suburban tennis centre in Canberra, Australia, and to a defining rite of passage from my youth. For those who've never been there, Canberra is a modestly-proportioned city that happens to be the capital of Australia. Visitors to the city sometimes feel it to be charmless. The truth is, it takes years of residence to confirm this beyond doubt.

Rites of passage take many different forms all around the world. Some are organised, some are chaotic. Some are benign, many aren't. As regards males, most rites of passage are designed to help a boy become a man. In rare cases, they are designed to help a boy become a eunuch. Poling, common in my youth, is one such case.

The origins of poling are shrouded in the howls of its victims. Academics agree it isn't Polish, although they haven't ruled out Germany. It is not a mechanically complicated process. It involves being picked up horizontally by a bunch of guys, having your legs placed on either side of a stout pole, and then driven with great force until either the pole or your crotch give way. Given that the poles are invariably selected for their sturdiness, the deck is stacked against said crotch remaining intact. It goes without saying that in classic poling, the 'polee' is a non-consenting party. When this basic condition is not met, poling is merely a fetish. This practice will not be considered here.

With that explanation in place, let's return to Canberra, where your writer is a thirteen year old boy. It was late in the day, and I was just leaving the tennis court, where I had comported myself with consummate grace, considerable artistry and – if I may say – a certain derring-do in losing 6/2 6/1. The afternoon sun was coming in low, but with a pronounced boldness, a fitting tribute to the glorious Spring day just ending, and a rich promise of the Summer approaching. I bid my friend farewell, complimenting him on his play while secretly knowing that I was laying strong foundations for future dominance. I noticed some girls from my school standing nearby. They had just completed an after-school tennis class. I fancied several of them, and felt sure that the feeling was reciprocated in the case of one. The scene was idyllic, and I wasn't to know that I was about to be humiliated as never before. The hour of my poling had arrived.

It must be said that being physically restrained and launched junk-first at a pole is not really humiliating on its own, even for teenagers (for whom hot-cheeked mortification is the factory setting). It's not like there's much you can do about it, although a show of resistance is expected. Indeed, if played correctly the experience might even be parlayed into a badge of honour, a large badge that might then be artfully worn over the wreckage of your scrotum. You are now part of an exclusive club, albeit one whose activities are mainly limited to sitting around nursing and comparing mashed nuts. Sadly, the particulars of my situation were such that even honour proved unsalvageable. I belong to no club. I doubt whether there are even support groups, even in America.

To my knowledge – and I'll admit I have not confirmed this recently – I remain the only person to have been poled exclusively by girls. A rare accolade, I know. And while you may think this means I got off lightly – a grazing in lieu of a pulping – rest assured that even thirteen year old girls in sufficient numbers can, when operating with fey cohesion, achieve impressive pole-ward velocity. It helped that their ringleader was Sam, a burly and especially androgynous lass who wore her hair short but for a rats-tail of particular magnificence. The year was 1989, and Sam's hairdo was widely admired, as were the Megadeth and Iron Maiden patches meticulously sewn to her denim jacket.

I was set upon suddenly by those young ladies from school, of which there were perhaps half a dozen, some of whom, as I've suggested, were quite comely. Under kinder circumstances, I would have been delighted for any of them to pay any attention to my genitals, and had spent no few hours in the idle contemplation of precisely that, although I'd envisaged caresses more lingering and less lethal. A case of being careful what you wish for, I suppose. Anyway, I was hoisted aloft, hollering 'Unhand me, you louts!', or something more appropriate to a teenage boy, something laced with expletives ('Heck', probably, perhaps a 'Darn it!'). I dropped my tennis racquet, a Wilson Pro-Staff whose

subtleties I would never master, and the can of balls, which spilt and scattered everywhere, a fairly fitting symbol for the catastrophic interaction between poll and loins that was soon to transpire. Sam manfully did the heavy lifting, whilst directing her team expertly. I was efficiently positioned, and then driven with great force into their chosen pole. Sadly, this still wasn't the most shaming part of it, even if it was the most public. People were watching by now.

In a perverse way, I'd like to tell you it felt exactly like you'd think it would. But it didn't. Somehow, despite the pole being two or three inches in diameter, and having been lined-up with the utmost care, it missed. That's right: I was hit flush in the groin with a large metal pole, and it utterly avoided anything of vital importance – I now have two lovely children – and didn't hurt much at all. Instinctively I knew that admitting this would be the most egregious *faux pas* I could commit. One day I might dine out on the tale of being molested by six teenage girls, if recounted with the right degree of self-deprecation. But there's just no way of selling even the implication of a package so miniscule that it could easily elude a full-frontal assault. That shame would stick forever.

Thus I doubled over in a fair approximation of indescribable agony. The fact they'd unceremoniously dumped me onto the cement after contact helped. In any case, my performance was convincing enough for dear sadistic Sam. Surveying the scene, she pronounced herself satisfied. I had apparently learned my lesson. She and the others moved away, pleased. No one came to help. I collected my racquet, and my balls.

Indeed I had learned my lesson. I'd learned several lessons, in fact. Firstly, that there are multiple layers to all social transactions, which are therefore like an onion. In my case, like an onion that had been attacked with a mallet, or David Nalbandian's foot, and somehow survived. Secondly, I'd learned that at no point would I ever have any chance of intimacy with any of those girls. The only exception was the brutish Sam, who I later found out had a crush on me. Crush, I reasoned, was the appropriate term. Nothing ever came of it, though I did later beat her at tennis, 6/2 6/1. Sweet revenge.

Luck of the Draw: Wimbledon 2012

The latest research in draw analysis theory has identified five discernible stages that a zealous tennis fan moves through when the draw to a Grand Slam tournament is released, which happened amidst moderate fanfare earlier today at Wimbledon. Draw analysis theory – which Americans call 'Bracketology', although only they find this cute – has developed into an exciting field in its own right, and many adjacent disciplines are seeking to utilise its findings.

Evolutionary psychologists, for example, have attempted to correlate draw analysis responses with survival behaviours found in primitive hunter gatherer societies. Admittedly, this effort is limited to a particular branch of evolutionary psychology, specifically the one whose exponents gained wide public favour some years back by writing loosely argued but lavishly illustrated books explaining why it is acceptable for married men to sleep around. (While it's true that most of the public favour originated with married men, who could now turn to their spouses and declare, 'Hey, it's science, baby!', that didn't hurt sales. The books were generally called things like *Why Woman Can't Read Maps, and Men Have to Sleep Around*, or *Why Men Can't Ask for Directions, and Have to Sleep Around*. This also didn't hurt sales. An era of blossoming promiscuity was only curtailed by the reality that most of these men did not really have the option of sleeping around. Once again, I digress.) The point is that this latest research has impeccable pedigree. Most of the authors use their middle initial, proving they're real academics. These findings will be presented in a new book, due out this summer, entitled *Bracketology, the Reading of Draws, and Why Men Have to Sleep Around*. Look for it at all good airport book stores.

What the original research confirmed is that when we tennis fans are first presented with a draw to a major tennis tournament, we move through multiple stages of elation, anxiety and despondency, often too tediously for the naked eye to follow. As mentioned, the origins for this behaviour have been reliably traced to prehistoric times. For example, cave paintings recently discovered in the Kimberly region of Western Australia clearly show a man exultantly raising his arms aloft upon discovering that Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic have been drawn in the same half, again. The man is depicted as some form of sun-god, suggesting he painted it himself. Evolutionary psychologists believe this moment occurred directly before departing for a hunt, or after sleeping with his sister-in-law.

Stage 1: Exultant Righteousness

The first task for any subject approaching a new draw is to work out where the top seeds fall, in order to confirm that Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer have been drawn in the same half, meaning that they will meet in the semifinals. The function of this task is fairly straightforward. Confirmation of the cherished conspiracy theory – the draw is *rigged* (apparently by uncreative idiots) – creates a buffer of impenetrable self-righteousness to insulate the subject from the rigours ahead. A powerful cocktail of chemicals is released, chiefly serotonin, as well as oxytocin, which explains why this stage has been known to induce labour if experienced in the final trimester of pregnancy.

Stage 2: Indignation

Thus fortified, the subject is now keen to see how his or her favourite player might fare. In the case of the general tennis fan, this almost inevitably means Nadal, Djokovic or Federer, and perhaps Murray. This stage requires a tremendous output of energy, as the subject strives tirelessly to establish that the favoured player's draw is the toughest since the age of legends, when the mighty Conan's path to the Wimbledon final led over the crushed bodies of Hyperborean giants, fearsome Djinn and perfumed assassins, whereupon he was forced to dispatch the great serpent Set.

In the case of this year's Wimbledon, we can say with some certainty that Federer's fans have it hardest of all. The role of underdog is a cherished one, but his draw is so benign that there is just no chance. 'But he may have to play Youzhny in the quarterfinals!' they implore. On the other hand, Murray's fans couldn't be happier. He has a draw from hell, worthy of any Cimmerian reaver, with a quarter featuring Raonic, Del Potro and Cilic. The BBC is practically orgasmic with dread. Highlander metaphors are being sharpened as we speak.

Nadal's draw is slightly kinder, although he will be forced to navigate a quarter unusually light on fellow Spaniards, apart from Lopez. Djokovic's is entirely manageable.

Stage 3A: Curiosity and Peckishness

This is the point at which avowedly committed tennis fans seek to put some distance between themselves and more casual pundits. He or she will commence wondering loudly at the fortunes of several slightly obscure players, although they will usually be players who have featured in the news lately.

For example, I note that Tommy Haas, recent champion in Halle, has drawn his compatriot Kohlschreiber in the first round. David Goffin plays Bernard Tomic first up. Brian Baker has navigated qualifying with nary a hitch, and faces Rui Machado. Grigor Dimitrov is fast developing into a perennial favourite in this stage. Those fancying themselves true fans will note that he has drawn Kevin Anderson, and will point out that this pair faced each other last week at Queens.

Many fans will partake of a light snack at this point, and maybe a drink.

Stage 3B: Toilet Break

I think this speaks for itself.

Stage 4: Sleepiness

It is only with the first three stages out of the way that a tennis fan can think about actual tennis. The draw is minutely surveyed for the most interesting first-round matches. Even lacking an Order of Play to consult, the scheduling of these matches is also considered. Some observers instead take a nap.

Consensus has it that the premium first-round matches are these: Hewitt v Tsonga, Nalbandian v Tipsarevic, Haas v Kohlschreiber and Fognini v Llodra. An honourable mention might go to Djokovic v Ferrero, though I cannot see that being close. British fans are endeavouring to convince everyone that Davydenko will pose some kind of challenge to Murray first up, which is frankly going overboard. Murray's draw is otherwise tough enough that there's no need to pretend Davydenko, who was weak on grass even in his prime, will pose any special problems. Some have pointed to Berdych v Gulbis, leaving one to wonder just how long the Latvian has to underperform before he isn't considered a threat.

Stage 5: Catharsis, Boredom and Probably Something Else

Having navigated the first four stages, committed tennis fans now find themselves experiencing a mild post-draw high, a profound sense of well-being caused by a light release of endorphins, although as these drain away they are left with the depressing realisation that the tournament isn't due to begin for another two days. There's consequently nothing much to fill the time except watching Eastbourne, or the top players being repeatedly interviewed so that they may also tell us how amazing it is to be back at SW19 and how splendid the courts are. With idle hands, bored and opinionated, there is only one option for us committed fans. The internet awaits.

Or, I suppose, we could just do something else.

Good News and Bad

Wimbledon, Day One

Gulbis d. (7) Berdych, 7/6 7/6 7/6

'Some have pointed to Berdych v Gulbis, leaving one to wonder just how long the Latvian has to underperform before he isn't considered a threat.' During the course of a lengthy Wimbledon draw analysis, in which I strayed edifyingly through a number of unrelated areas and used the phrase 'sleep around' a lot, this was about as close as I came to actually making any kind of prediction. Glib though it was, I was quite confident.

Ernest's Gulbis of course upset Tomas Berdych in three sets today (all impeccable tiebreaks), thereby meting out hubristic damnation on me and generating an exhausting torrent of punning headlines elsewhere. In my defence, there was surely no way of knowing that this was going to happen, and that it would happen on the world's most famous tennis court to a world No.7 who was actually playing very well. Berdych's complicated expression of sickly disappointment during the handshake said it all: self-disgust, layered atop frustration at a freakishly unlucky draw, bafflement and relief that Gulbis doesn't play this well all the time, and an urge to quit the scene immediately, in pursuit of a stiff drink.

Gulbis struck 62 winners, featuring 30 aces (several on second serves), in just three sets. The winners that weren't aces were usefully spread across forehands (he has revised his swing), backhands, and net play. Indeed, it is to Berdych's credit that all three sets reached tiebreakers, especially the third one, in which he saved several match points on serve at 4/5. Gulbis afterwards suggested that it had actually helped him to draw a big name player on Centre Court first up, with the corollary being that his next match, against a qualifier on an outer paddock court, will be eminently losable. Or not. I'd relish seeing him go further, playing like this. Either way, I'm done with predictions.

From my remote command centre in Melbourne, the choices of what to watch were broad, although as ever greater choice did not necessarily guarantee greater satisfaction. I had a comprehensive array of streams at my disposal, a kind of endlessly buffering panopticon. Fox Sports always feels underdone and seems to show the wrong thing. And, for that heady cocktail of cringe-inducing hilarity, there was of course Channel 7, ably anchored by the preternaturally cheerful Todd Woodbridge.

Channel 7 typically kicked off its coverage with a comprehensive round-up of those few Australians who'd by varying means stumbled into the main draw, followed by a skewed analysis of which of them would progress farthest through it. John Newcombe, always keen to prove that nationalistic derangement and tennis commentary aren't mutually exclusive, essayed the confident opinion that Lleyton Hewitt was about a 40% chance to take out Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in their first round match. Woodbridge, lurking beside him, said little at the time, although later during commentary he upgraded Our Lleyton's chances to 50%, suggesting that whatever Newcombe spiked his drink with took about an hour to metabolise.

Channel 7 then put the question of which Australian would go farthest (out of Sam Stosur, Bernard Tomic and Hewitt) to the viewers. 62% of the viewers who can be bothered to respond to this kind of thing – a startlingly large proportion – believed in

Stosur, while 35% had faith in Tomic. This left an impressive 3% of viewers supporting Hewitt. We were sternly reminded that this was the tenth anniversary of his Wimbledon triumph, but the numbers remained firm, which seemed fair enough. After all, it's the 60th anniversary of Frank Sedgman's title, and no one is giving him much of a chance, either.

It was to Channel 7's profound ire that two of the three Australians permitted to grace televised courts today were scheduled to play at the same time. While they'll happily abandon, say, Federer versus Djokovic to shows us Jelena Dokic hitting against a wall, they will never abandon Our Sam while any strength remains in the director's body. Not for long anyway. We were periodically torn away from Stosur's hiding of Carla Stepanek Navarro to witness key moments in Jarmila Gajdošová's straightforward loss to Ayumi Morita, with each cross prefaced by the phrase, 'Well, it's more bad news for Jarmila.' Later on it was more bad news for Anastasia Rodionova, who has never quite captured the imagination of Australian tennis fans, and was dealt the ultimate insult when the broadcaster bumped her match for Federer's.

Initially it seemed like pretty bad news for Mikhail Youzhny, as he fell down a set and a break to Donald Young, before the good doctor remembered that Young isn't actually that good, whereupon the Russian commenced dispatching lovely backhand winners all over the place, volleying beautifully, looking fiery (if sadly beardless) and winning most of the games. Young unleashed his full repertoire of despondent body language. He is the Roger Federer of shoulder slumps. At about the same time Richard Gasquet saw off the eternally underperforming Tobias Kamke with, I felt, surprising ease. (I harbour the same hopes for Kamke that others have for Gulbis, with even less reason.) There were, naturally, backhands. Fernando Verdasco was making rather a hash of it against Jimmy Wang, or as much of a hash as a straight sets win can be. Whenever I switched to his court the Spaniard was failing to serve out a set. I think he was broken while doing so every time.

With no way to show us Marinko Matosevic losing to Xavier Malisse, a frustrated Channel 7 was obliged to show Djokovic starting slowly – some of the early misses were horrendous – but finishing rapidly against Juan Carlos Ferrero. Since there were no Australians involved, even tangentially, 7 didn't bother to send a commentator along, and instead relayed Simon Reed and Boris Becker. As with Newcombe, Becker has been there and done it all at Wimbledon, much like Mats Wilander at Roland Garros. The level of insight was about the same. Occasionally an Australian voice would chime in, although not seamlessly, 'Well, it's more bad news for Marinko.' A score update would helpfully illustrate this bad news, which progressively got worse.

It was then demonstrated that even Federer isn't worth Newcombe's time, although there was little opportunity to reflect on this, as Federer set about proving that Albert Ramos wasn't worth much of *his* time, either: 6/1 6/1 6/1, in 79 minutes. According to the notoriously lenient Wimbledon stats, Federer hit 10 unforced errors. In truth, it felt like slightly more than that, but only slightly. Ramos, utterly outclassed and on the wrong surface, was lucky to escape a triple bagel. He only held serve twice, and he was fortunate to get one of those. Leaving the court, Ramos admittedly didn't look like he felt very lucky, although I can't imagine he'd expected to win. Federer received a standing ovation. Suddenly, despite all the bad news, it felt like Wimbledon was under way.

A Visit to the World of Tennis

Wimbledon, Day Three

Channel 7's broadcast of the 2012 Wimbledon Championships was last night as curiously free of John Newcombe's presence as the singles draw is of Australian men. These two phenomena are not unrelated. Indeed, one presumes that it is a key component of Newcombe's contract that he'll only tarry so long as he can rhapsodise glowingly about those young men who selected their country of origin with adequate care.

The word is that this marks the first time no Australian man has progressed to the second round of the Championships since we Australian men first emerged from the primordial muck in the late Devonian period. Other Australian men, whose task it is to aggrandise or excoriate the nation's athletes in national newspapers, have relished the opportunity to bemoan this rare achievement. Today Sam Stosur was upset by Aranxta Rus, which has seen the disparate moans unite and swell to an ululating wail, rather like having a squadron of Ju-87s descending on you. As reigning US Open champion, she is supposed to do what our men could not. She did, but only for a round. Failure this comprehensive, it is reasoned, points to structural issues, which are easier to talk about than the nebulous idea that sometimes tennis players just lose. Meanwhile Channel 7, incensed and rudderless, inflicted Caroline Wozniacki on us until we begged them to stop.

(Q) Janowicz d. Gulbis, 2/6 6/4 3/6 7/6 9/7

Sometimes tennis players lose a lot, and they lose in fascinatingly predictable ways. Ernests Gulbis' affable suggestion that he could follow-up his superb victory over Tomas Berdych by losing to Jerzy Janowicz was greeted with the knowing amusement everyone felt it merited, even though it has since turned out to be depressingly accurate. At the time it was hard to take the Latvian too seriously, because it was in a press conference

and his editions of those are less than dour, but also because his airy prediction languished beneath much talk of new leaves being upended, corners turned, and other clichés that sound less trite when you’ve just straight-setted the seventh seed on Centre Court.

To be fair, it did look somewhat like a new Gulbis that fell to Janowicz, although it wasn’t quite the new Gulbis that had seen off Berdych two days earlier. Still, this Gulbis was committed, and actually played quite well, where the old one would have merely flailed about disinterestedly. Janowicz is a large unit, with a powerful and varied serve well-suited to grass, which began to figure increasingly as the fifth set wore down. Gulbis won more points overall, but not in that crucial game deep in the fifth, when the Pole started to guess on return, and to guess right.

(31) Mayer d. Petzschner, 3/6 3/6 6/4 6/2 6/4

Janowicz will play Florian Mayer in the next round, which one imagines is not an ideal match-up for him, although Mayer has mostly under-achieved on grass. Mayer took out Philipp Petzschner in a relatively quick five setter. Before you knew it, Petzschner had blown a two set to love lead, which is kind of his specialty; thereby proving that with practice comes efficiency. Apparently he now has the career grand slam in this area. It’s something to be proud of, I suppose, although any man wearing knee-socks has conceivably ventured beyond pride. As ever when these two play, I am reminded that both men hail from Bayreuth, yet I search in vain for a suitably Wagnerian angle. (I’ve used Rossini’s famous dismissals of Wagner before, though I ache to use them again.) Wimbledon will only consider an error unforced if you stand at the net with the ball in your hand, drop it over and somehow miss the court. Consequently the statistics in this area can be safely disregarded. This match was nowhere as clean as the stats suggest. It was frankly a bit of a mess. Like *Die Walküre*. That’ll have to do.

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

Roger Federer was beyond clean in his consummate thrashing of Fabio Fognini (although even in this case the tally of 8 unforced errors recorded by the tournament was surely over-generous). Given the Italian’s celebrated dramatic gifts, it proved wise on Federer’s part to permit him insufficient time and space in which to perform. After recovering from 0-30 in his opening service game, Federer hardly relented. Fognini was under immense pressure the entire time. Although this periodically spurred him to audacious winners – I can think of three backhand winners in particular, all completely different, since even he found them to be unrepeatable – it mostly left him frustrated, which in his case is generally a recipe for disinterest. Fognini’s gift for theatre requires a suitable moment in

which to flourish. His true gift is for noting this moment as it arrives, when the tension might be cranked up to an unbearable level, whereupon he'll call for a medical timeout, or serve four aces, or drop his trousers. But Federer was today so powerful and precise that no such moment arrived. There was no late comeback, no escalating series of holds, no tiebreaks. Fognini achieved a perfect record on break point conversions: 0/0. The most dramatic moment came when Federer fell late in proceedings and appeared to twist his left knee. Apparently it wasn't serious, and it didn't help Fognini. This is one of those matches for which I can happily recommend highlights, since even an edited package won't feel qualitatively different from watching the match.

Afterwards Federer granted Prince Charles an audience. I cannot say what was said, since the Wimbledon website has been typically slow in providing a transcript. Astute royal watchers will recall that slightly goofy moment when Jim Courier forced Federer to address Prince William on court in Melbourne a few years ago: 'Welcome to the world of tennis, Your Highness.' Even without Courier presiding, I pray Federer had the grace to bring that moment up while chatting to William's dad, and remembered to welcome His Royal Highness to the world of tennis.

Top Shelf Trogglehumpers

Wimbledon, Days Four and Five

The BFG was getting more distressed every moment. 'Oh bash my eyebones!' he cried, waving the jar in the air. 'I come all this way to get lovely golden dreams and what is I catching?'

'What are you catching?' Sophie said.

'I is catching a frightsome trogglehumper!' he cried. 'This is a bad bad dream! It is worse than a bad dream! This is a nightmare!'

Rosol d. (2) Nadal, 6/7 6/4 6/4 2/6 6/4

Fans of Rafael Nadal awoke this morning to discover that the player they adore above all others did indeed lose a tennis match to Lukas Rosol yesterday. It is a deflating realisation to wake up to, and its low-key squalor suggests something of how experiencing your favourite's loss is a delicate kind of grief, in the way it embroiders your idle moments, and in the way it insistently picks at your sense of time. Causal threads snap, and you lose yourself in fruitless and aimless musings on what might have been; had he only made that return, or stood closer to the baseline, or had the roof

closed quicker and the other guy choked the way he was meant to. The comfort of these musings grows frigid as you recall that musings are all they are. Time's arrow won't be deflected, certainly not by a mere effort of will. He really did lose. It isn't a dream, but you can't wake up.

Writing in another guise of other things, I once remarked that 'the inventory of perfect things he should have said grew definite in his mind, like figurines vigorously sanded and buffed until they were fitting ornaments, cherished knick-knacks on the mantelpiece of his sad torpor.' Setting aside the undoubted arrogance of quoting oneself and the immortal Roald Dahl in the same piece – I'll get some Shakespeare in before the end, just see if I don't – it hopefully evokes something of how these idle and pointless musings rapidly ossify into discrete objects, to the extent that they can only be altered with great effort. Many tennis fans then hone these objects to a fine point, take them to the internet, and hurl them at each other.

Anyway, such musings – *useful* musings – drew me to the fancy that we tennis fans apprehend entire matches in more or less the same way. Their dramatic coherence and identifiable narratives enable us to treat them like books or movies or ornaments, which is to say tangible and understandable entities in and of themselves. These can be meaningfully juxtaposed against each other, endlessly permuted and arranged into a kind of glass bead game.

Like the Big Friendly Giant's dreams – he is, fundamentally, a kind of big dream nerd – our seminal matches are carefully catalogued and arranged. (If there's one activity nerds cherish, it is cataloguing their collections. Recall Rob in *High Fidelity*, who sought solace after a painful breakup by reorganising his vast record collection *autobiographically*.) The best matches go on the top shelf, like the best spirits at a bar. High atop my shelves sit the 2000 Wimbledon semifinal between Rafter and Agassi, and the incomparable 2006 Rome final, among the most pivotal matches of the era. Other matches are arrayed around and below these according to a complex system of associations and instinct and flavour. To take an obvious example, the 2001 Wimbledon semifinal between the same two protagonists – superficially similar but dramatically distant – is nearby, but not too close. As in a bar, the liquor gets worse as your gaze descends. Djokovic and Troicki's hopeless encounter from Bercy last year sits under the sink, labelled piratically, and is used to clean vomit out of the carpet. Nadal and Verdasco's match from Cincinnati *is* the vomit.

Whenever an important new match takes place we immediately cross-reference it against our collection, to see how it fits. After Nadal fell to Rosol, the immediate and

obvious comparison was to Soderling at Roland Garros in 2009. Once this latest loss is bottled, space will surely be made for it nearby on the same shelf. Rosol's name – which has become smeared with a Soderling-like infamy among Nadal fans in the last 24 hours – has also established a resonance with those of other random and unlikely past vanquishers, such as Gilles Müller or Igor Andrejev. From now on we'll be reliably and patiently informed of what a threat Rosol is, should they ever meet again, much like Muller and Andrejev aren't. Now, I can of course see why the comparison to the Soderling match has been made, since in both cases they were unimagined upsets in which a big man simply and cruelly hit through Nadal with an utter disregard for the gravity of the moment. Soderling and Rosol are the Fleshlumpeater and the Butcher Boy of this ongoing saga. But I suspect there's a better spot on the shelves for this match.

I'm going to put it next to Martin Verkerk's astounding upset of Carlos Moya at the 2003 French Open, a key encounter in the Dutchman's frankly ridiculous run to the final that year. His straight sets dismantling of Guillermo Coria in the semifinals is probably more remembered, if only for the moment when the Argentine was nearly defaulted. But it's important to recall that Moya was considered a favourite for the Roland Garros title that year. It was blithely assumed that he would, with little trouble, halt this nonsensical Dutch sideshow in the quarterfinals. But Verkerk's performance that day was fearsome, fearless and pugnacious. He matched the Spaniard's intensity, and transcended it, demonstrating no appreciation of just how unlikely victory was, of how poor his movement was – he had the turning circle of an oil rig – and of how effortlessly Moya was supposed to dismantle him. He won, in five sets, by hitting the ball very powerfully into parts of the court where Moya wasn't, over and over again. Sound familiar? It was, frankly, Soderling-like. I mean Rosol-like. I mean . . . Thinking on it, perhaps those three matches can go together, on a special shelf of their own.

(3) Federer d. (29) Benneteau, 4/6 6/7 6/2 7/6 6/1

This brings us to Roger Federer's stirring recovery at Wimbledon today, in which he trailed Julien Benneteau by two sets to love, before defeating him by three sets to two. Federer has now achieved this feat eight times in his career, although, mercifully, it hasn't always been against Benneteau. The Frenchman's angry tears as Federer gained match points suggested that once is enough. As a match, it resists lazy taxonomy. Perhaps we just need more time.

For now, I've chosen to place it alongside Federer's similar recoveries against Alejandro Falla in the first round of Wimbledon two years ago, and against Tomas Berdych at the Australian Open in 2009. My reason for this is that, even at two sets to love down, I

somehow couldn't imagine Federer actually losing. He probably felt differently, and many of his fans undoubtedly did, especially once that second set tiebreaker spiralled away vertiginously, following three missed set points. There was, naturally, the widespread assumption that Benneteau could not sustain his level of reckless brilliance. But Rosol had forcefully reminded us that one actually can, although Radek Stepanek had mounted a persuasive counter-argument some hours earlier, as he tumbled sharply against a surging Djokovic.

Honestly, Benneteau *was* brilliant, even more so than the time he beat Federer in Paris. Each of those set points was saved with a winner – forehand, ace, drop volley – and he was overcoming Federer in most of the baseline exchanges. Federer was playing decently, except in that first tiebreak, but Benneteau was matching him, especially in that long crucial third game of the second set, in which Federer was laboriously broken back, to his audible dismay. Federer fans twitched, and cleared some space near the 2008 Wimbledon final – a horrid trogglehumper, that one; awful and resplendent on a shelf of its own – uneasily recalling nightmares of second set breaks squandered.

There was always the sense that Federer had another gear to go to, to peddle cliché. As Agassi put it, Federer will periodically ascend 'to a place I don't recognise'. Once he got on top in the third set, it seemed clear he'd found that gear, and, furthermore, that any eventual five setter would favour him physically. Some dicey moments arrived at the end of the fourth set, when Federer had to fight to attain the tiebreaker, as a resurgent Benneteau proved resourceful in saving game points, but couldn't find the crucial shots in the deuce court. The tiebreaker was a glorious mess, and the Frenchman came within two points of the match, but still I didn't feel like Federer would allow Benneteau to win. His second serve grew monstrous, an ominous sign in a sport in which that's the thing you're allegedly only as good as. Once Federer had the fourth set in hand, like the Falla match from 2010, his opponent fell away, and the Swiss was inexorable. Benneteau's legs gave out. He received treatment for this, and copped more than a few stern words from the supervisor.

How high a shelf this match will occupy is up for debate, though it's the kind of debate that cannot be usefully conducted on short notice. Everyone tried that after the Australian Open final, and looked surprised when the highest shelf proved too fragile by half for so ponderous and hefty a bauble, and promptly collapsed, wounding a number of bystanders. A sense of perspective is imperative. I realise this is a fairly quixotic sentiment to maintain on the internet. It's usually best to sleep on it, even if for Benneteau his dreams might all be fearsome trogglehumpers. But dreams are what we're made of, and sleep rounds out our little lives. There's your Shakespeare.

Tomorrow we'll know what it all meant, even if sometimes, nightmares aside, we'd prefer not to wake.

Unnamed Monday

Wimbledon, Day Seven

Of the 128 men who almost randomly populated the Wimbledon men's singles draw on the tournament's opening morning, fully 112 failed to last the week. They have since joined forces with the roughly three billion other men who never had any chance, a staggering tally that features yours truly, although not prominently. We are the rabble, for all that our number includes kings and captains, cabbages and Rafael Nadal. Sixteen men remained, and it is only by generously rounding up that I could even call them the one per cent, although doing so was a necessary step in cultivating my outrage. Their number included Roger Federer and Denis Istomin. They got to play in the second week. It's a privilege.

All sixteen men were scheduled to play today, ostensibly the greatest single day of tennis in the year – our sport's answer to Sandwich Day – which is surely a blow to the US Open organisers, who've gone to some lengths to dub their second Saturday 'Super'. Isn't it fitting that the second Monday at Wimbledon doesn't even have a name? Can you imagine an American event permitting that oversight to continue? Think of the wasted marketing potential, the value of which can be measured in 'Lobotomies per square mile'. My research department informs me that by failing properly to christen its second Monday, Wimbledon has foregone approximately 143,400 lobotomies in the Open Era. That's a lot of people who are still capable of independent thought. Frankly, it's too many.

With that in mind, I propose the formation of a working committee to address this issue. After all, a concept un-marketed is a concept wasted, a concession to the vacuum, and I vaguely recall reading somewhere that nature abhors those, although I might be thinking of gerbils. The first rule of naming anything is that, as with Superman's love-interests, one cannot go wrong with alliteration. That's presumably why *Super Saturday* is such an unalloyed success, since it cannot be due to the undoubted wisdom of scheduling both men's semifinals the afternoon before the final. Sadly, *Mad Monday* is already taken, although 'mad', like 'super' is suggestive. What it suggests is that whichever word is eventually chosen – following an extensive submission and shortlisting process – must lend itself to exclamation points, and to deployment in the kind of font that would flash up on screen whenever Adam West or Burt Ward punched

people. *Mental* is therefore good. *Mellow* is not. *Maximum* might usefully be incorporated. *Midget*, not so much. *Manic* would work, if it hadn't been co-opted by the same women who ruined Egyptian perambulation for everyone. Anyway, submissions are open.

(3) Federer d. Malisse, 7/6 6/1 4/6 6/3

Mostly today was *Meteorologically-Abbreviated Monday*, which I don't expect will catch on, notwithstanding that England is the spot for it. Only three of the eight scheduled matches saw completion. The first of these, assessed chronologically and in terms of concern over Roger Federer's spine, was said player's scratchy, lurching, masterful, lumbar-inhibited victory over Xavier Malisse. *Malisse Monday*? Federer, as almost anyone who cares will presumably already know, was troubled from near the outset, especially in his movement, footwork, groundstrokes, volleys, and serve. His hair was pretty good, and at one point he rocked the hell out of a fairly natty cream sweater. But he could barely push to his right, and his forehands were uncharacteristically feeble when stretched that way. Malisse duly stretched him to that side, but nowhere near often enough.

Initial bafflement among the faithful bloomed into heaving unease when Federer left the court leading 4/3 in the first set for a medical time-out. John Newcombe, commentating on Channel 7, perceptively suggested that Federer might be sick. *Malaise Monday*? Darren Cahill over on ESPN had already identified a back issue. Federer returned eight minutes later, but hadn't improved. Malisse pushed him wide to the forehand, and broke. Then the Belgian made a tiny tactical error, although it was one that would ultimately cost him the set, if not the match. He stopped hitting the ball wide to Federer's forehand, and he stopped hitting the ball into the court. Federer was by now caressing his shots with a Tomic-like somnolence, and in several pivotal rallies merely goaded Malisse into over-hitting. These points were usefully interleaved with ripping backhand passes, deft hands, and brazen chip-charges. Anything but big forehands. The second set disappeared quickly. Once he'd broken back in the fourth, that one went quickly too. Malisse grabbed a set. *Mercurial Monday*?

(26) Youzhny d. Istomin, 6/3 5/7 6/4 6/7 7/5

That might usefully describe Mikhail Youzhny's fairly stirring win over Denis Istomin, who, had he won, would have seemed like a pretty unlikely Wimbledon quarterfinalists, in contrast to Youzhny, who has somehow never been there, either. This is surprising. It feels like Youzhny should have made the quarterfinals of Wimbledon before. Indeed, there's no one particularly good reason why so elegant a grass-courter hasn't reached

the final eight in a career's-worth of visits (he has done so at each of the other majors), although there are lots of little ones. Mostly he keeps losing in the fourth round. I suppose that's hard to argue with.

Anyway, The Colonel didn't lose today, but it was a close thing. Up two sets to one, it seemed quite likely that he'd finish it off, especially since Istomin's lone set had come against the run of play. Then Istomin augmented his lone set with another, further thumbing his nose at the run of play. Then he broke in the fifth - thereby blowing his nose on the run of play's favourite pillowcase - and nothing made sense anymore: *Muddled Monday*. Youzhny broke back, quite magnificently, and displayed typical reticence in broadcasting his satisfaction, looking as ever like he could bite the head off a chicken in his exultation. Again the hope that he'd push on was quashed, or at least forestalled, as Istomin kept finding break points, although Youzhny kept retrieving them - overhead winner, ace, forehand - in a long tenth game that Istomin otherwise spent supine on the turf. There was a persistent misty drizzle, and footing was not secure. Youzhny held, then eventually broke. He'll next face Federer, for the former a first Wimbledon quarterfinal, for the latter his tenth in a row.

(1) Djokovic d. Troicki, 6/3 6/1 6/3

The only other completed match saw Victor Troicki put in his usual effort when confronted with the towering Novak Djokovic - *Matterhorn Monday* - which is to say a perfunctory one, suggesting that Janko Tipsarevic's newfound determination to take it to the world No.1 isn't at risk of becoming a trend among his lesser compatriots. As ever, this lesser compatriot instead set about proving Henry Ford's famously inspirational maxim: 'Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're Viktor Troicki.' Being who he is, he probably wasn't going to beat Djokovic, who has the wherewithal to be what he is irrespective of our beliefs, but he could have given a far better account of himself. He needed to be a better Troicki than the one he invariably is when faced with the defending champion.

Djokovic looked tremendous, but it was the kind of tremendous that is almost troubling for a fan, since it's so good you immediately assume it isn't real, like watching someone nail every shot in target practice. Whether Troicki lurched to the net, or noodled about near the baseline, target practice was all he provided. *Mismatch Monday*.

The rest of the matches will be finished on Tuesday. *Train-wreck? Torrential? Tangential?*

Temazepam Tuesday

Wimbledon, Day Eight

(7) Ferrer d. (9) del Potro, 6/3 6/2 6/3

Less than twenty-four hours after Mikhail Youzhny realised his secret lifelong goal of reaching the quarterfinal stage at all four Majors – the fact that he has previously gone on record about this precisely nowhere speaks only to its secrecy – David Ferrer has done the same. They are two veterans whose destinies are now forever entangled. Word is that the Tennis Channel is planning an hour-long special, narrated by Morgan Freeman.

Facetiousness aside, it *is* an achievement, especially for Ferrer, who for too long has been written off as a mere clay-courter. It would be a stretch to call him a grass-courter, but then we don't really have those any more. On a snoozy Tuesday at Wimbledon, Ferrer was the one worth staying awake for.

Hitting a winner against Ferrer today wasn't the same as hitting one against, say, Andy Roddick, who blankets the net like a small bunny-rug, in order to prove that passing shots are more or less the same as any other groundstroke. In all, Juan Martin del Potro struck 37 winners and 20 unforced errors (although these are Wimbledon-branded unforced errors, which only register when you miss a shot so badly that it brains a spectator on an adjacent court). And he still lost 3, 2, and 3. Ferrer struck 34 winners, and only eight unforced errors. Undoubtedly he hit more errors than that, but I can't remember them. He was a wall, a lazy metaphor that fissures when one considers that the height disparity means del Potro could step over it, and that collapses entirely when one tries to evoke the Spaniard's incredible mobility, and his keenness to attack wherever possible. An aggressive wall.

Nevertheless, the story of the match was not how many winners Del Potro struck, but how many more winners he should have produced but didn't. There is no statistic for that. Nor are there any figures to tell us how often Ferrer lacked even the manners to yield up a *forced* error, where a more gracious competitor would have been more accommodating. Anyway, the point is that Ferrer's immense skills of retrieval were today operating at a level that drew admiring titters from the commentators, and that drove del Potro spare. From this moment in each point, one of three outcomes was possible. The Argentine might relent, at which point Ferrer would skilfully step in and grasp the initiative. This happened about 34 times. Del Potro might go for more, and dispatch a winner that even Ferrer couldn't track down. This happened about 37 times. Del Potro

might go for more, but commit an error. There was also any number of rallies in which Ferrer maintained the initiative from the beginning – whether it was on his own serve or his opponent’s – and quite a few excellent passing shots.

This is a pretty long way of saying that Ferrer was impeccable, and that those who would ridicule his chances of reaching the semifinal or final would do well to revise their opinions skywards, especially if you’re British. He was a small, swiftly moving wall that his much taller opponent couldn’t scale, and which periodically fired bricks out with great force. It’s a cliché, but it will have to do. There probably needs to be a dog in there somewhere, as well.

(31) Mayer d. (18) Gasquet, 6/3 6/1 3/6 6/2

Richard Gasquet has certainly not reached the quarterfinal stage at all four Majors. Indeed, he has reached the quarterfinal at only one Major, which was Wimbledon, although it wasn’t this year. It was in 2007, the year he broke into the top ten. Since then he has fallen eight times in the fourth round at Majors, for an overall record of 1-12 at this stage. The latest loss occurred today, when he was upset by Florian Mayer in four sets, suggesting that the Frenchman’s current ranking in the mid-teens is about right.

Mayer’s delightfully eccentric and slice-addled game should translate very well to grass, but for some reason it rarely does. His only previous trip to the Wimbledon quarterfinals was on debut in 2004, although to be fair that remained the *only* time he has passed the third round at any Major until today, which I find frankly baffling, even allowing for his periodic injury woes. Astute readers may be aware that I’ve had a soft spot for Mayer for some time. He’ll face Djokovic in the next round, so his chances of reaching a maiden semifinal are not fantastic. In any case, he was tremendous today, especially on return of serve. He sliced Gasquet to ribbons. I could say that his scything flat shots forced his opponent back off the baseline, but this is Gasquet, and Amanda Koetzer could force him off the baseline, even now. But once the Frenchman was comfortably entrenched by the back hoarding, Mayer’s skill with angles and paces succeeded in making Gasquet look quite foolish. I like Gasquet, but it’s the complicated regard that I suspect all his fans share, which includes a certain measure of satisfaction when he is punished for his horrendous court-positioning.

(4) Murray d. (16) Cilic, 7/5 6/2 6/3

(5) Tsonga d. (10) Fish, 4/6 7/6 6/4 6/4

(27) Kohlschreiber d. (Q) Baker, 6/1 7/6 6/3

I won't spend too long on the remaining matches, although I did watch all of them as well as I could. Andy Murray was very solid against Marin Cilic in their delayed match, so much so that the Croatian's very long match in the prior round was rendered irrelevant. I'm not sure anyone hits backhands as hard as Murray when he wants to. The issue, as ever, is why he so often doesn't want to. He was charming and personable afterwards, and flat out said he didn't care what court he played on, which has in no way inspired anyone else in England to change their tune. The tune itself is worthy but dull, and they have no gift for variation whatsoever. Perhaps Beethoven could have done something with it – look at that Diabelli waltz – but it's all too much for the London press. He'll face Ferrer next, on Centre Court, and his legion fans will have more to worry about.

Meanwhile Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Mardy Fish battled manfully to see who could snare the lion's share of the trainer's attention. Fish served the ball into a linesperson's eye, which is altogether more impressive than hitting a bottle off someone's head. Luckily there's vision, so to speak, and the footage has made the rounds. The latest is that we're all impressed that the linewoman still made the call. Stiff upper lip and all that, even with a bruised eye socket. Tsonga improved enormously as the match continued, and is looking very strong for at least a quarterfinal. He'll face Philipp Kohlschreiber, who ended Brian Baker's dream run. Indeed, Kohlschreiber has been on something of a dream-crushing spree this tournament, having already taken out Tommy Haas in the opening round, and Lukas Rosol in the third. I still like him, though.

Making Omelettes

Wimbledon, Semifinal

(3) Federer d. (1) Djokovic, 6/3 3/6 6/4 6/3

The verdict is in. Sunday's men's final at Wimbledon will be nothing short of epoch-shattering. The statistics prove it. This is troubling news for those who remain quaintly attached to the current epoch, with its slavish devotion to precision time-keeping and its increasingly mannered approach to cuisine. But, if nothing else, history and reality cooking shows have taught us that omelettes aren't to be fashioned from intact eggs, and it has, quite literally, been weeks since a tennis matches had this much riding on it. Change is coming. You really can't stop it.

Indeed, the epoch only narrowly survived today's semifinals intact, although in the case of Jo-Wilfried Tsonga the cracked eggs just barely remained metaphorical. Records were begging to be smashed or assembled all over the place, depending on one's proclivities. Novak Djokovic sought to complete the career Grand Slam of defeating Roger Federer in Major semifinals, thereby becoming the first man to do so. Federer, for his part, would by losing have completed his career Grand Slam of failing in Major semifinals. Opportunities like that don't come around every day. Had he lost, Andy Murray would have become the first man to fail to reach a Wimbledon final after having Rafael Nadal cleared from his path, and therefore the first person to be publically executed in the United Kingdom in nearly fifty years. (Federer's earlier claim of 150,000 years, widely reported, was clearly made in jest.) Tsonga, following an incident late in the third set, would have become the first person to win a mixed-doubles match on his own. The lesson is that when epochs require shattering, it is the quantity of the records that matter, rather than the quality.

Frankly, it is daunting how the quirky statistics pour forth when important matches take place. At the best of times these numbers are an insistent flow at risk of deepening into a flood. When fraught Wimbledon semifinals come around this flood can expand to a vast cataract that threatens to inundate farmland for miles around. I understand that for many fans statistics create the illusion of apprehending the sport in a meaningful way. This is mostly harmless, assuming we don't thereby invest the sport with more meaning than it can sustain – the conceit of American sports coverage – or imagine that these are terms the players themselves think in. We mustn't pretend this stuff matters. To the players, the numbers that truly count are few. For Federer those numbers are 1, 7, 17, and perhaps 286.

Federer, who with today's victory has reached more Major finals than anyone else, is constantly reminded of obscure milestones. The more he professes his unawareness of each record in the teeth of stern interrogation, the more scepticism we feel. How can this stuff mean so little to him, we wonder, when it means so much to us? Coming into today's match, Federer's fans probably knew far more about his record against Djokovic (second man to defeat Florian Mayer in a major quarterfinal) than Federer himself did, for all that he, like Nadal, is unusually retentive of such details. But Federer knows far better what it feels like to *play* Djokovic. This is arguably more useful than the searing awareness that he had lost four of their last five encounters at Grand Slam level. During the first set of today's semifinal you can be sure he wasn't attempting to win his first set from the last nine, stretching back to last year's US Open. He was just trying to win one, and he did. Then he tried to win another one, but didn't, at least not straight away.

Todd Woodbridge helpfully reminded me that Federer had never before lost a set in a Wimbledon semifinal (not even to Jonas Bjorkman). This seemed like an important fact, and I wondered if Paul Annacone would risk a code violation in making his charge aware of it. John Newcombe, on the other hand, has little head for statistics. Indeed, the only numbers he seems to be aware of when watching Federer play are 'four or five'. In 2012, this is how many years it has been since Newk last saw Federer play this well. Last year it was 'three or four'. You can imagine the verbal gymnastics he performed back in 2007, when Federer was apparently playing like this all the time. I suppose it was merely a way of saying this was vintage form. Not for the first time this fortnight, I wished he *had* just said that. In any case, Federer recovered from his first dropped set in a Wimbledon semifinal, and took hold of the match in the third, as the world No.1's form dipped.

It was certainly a vintage performance on serve. Federer's variety was immense, and Djokovic, by broad consensus the finest returner in the game, was constantly guessing wrong. There were some beautiful body serves at the Serb's right hip. Djokovic is good enough that even when guessing wrong, on grass, he can get a racquet on the ball, but he too often managed little more than that. He won 28% of points on Federer's second serve. He also committed twice as many errors (21 to 10), and slipped around a lot. Djokovic's ongoing effectiveness against Federer is heavily reliant upon superb movement and the capacity to force the Swiss into desperate errors. Not today.

The last point of the match was a curious echo of Federer's final point at the 2009 French Open: a first serve up the T to the ad court, an off forehand return dumped meekly into the net, and a pause so tiny it might have been missed had it not been so pregnant. I momentarily expected the sport's greatest player to collapse to his knees and raise his hands to his face, but the colours were wrong – white and green instead of blue and red – and the moment passed. Federer thrust his arms aloft, and shook his fist, his relief a muted echo of his wife Mirka's, whose face was tilted gratefully to the heavens, or to the roof, whichever had been more helpful. Federer is the first man to reach eight Wimbledon finals in the Open Era.

Federer is often asked in interviews which of the achievements still remaining to him would mean the most, and if he could achieve just one, which it would be. It's usually a multiple choice question, and the options generally include claiming an Olympic gold medal in singles, winning another Wimbledon title, or regaining the No.1 ranking. If he is victorious on Sunday he will claim his seventh Wimbledon and seventeenth Major title. He will also regain the No.1 ranking for the first time in over two years, and it will be impossible for him to reign there for less than the two weeks he requires to surpass

Sampras's record of 286 weeks atop the ATP rankings. Perhaps more importantly, he will also become the first man to defeat Andy Murray in three Major finals, and the first to do any of that while his dad wears a lucky red hat.

Curious Meteorological Phenomena

Wimbledon, Semifinals

(4) Murray d. (5) Tsonga, 6/3 6/4 3/6 7/5

It was raining when the first of the Wimbledon semifinals commenced, a curious meteorological phenomenon that saw the tournament organisers make the unprecedented decision of closing the roof before play started. This signalled a radical departure from their earlier policy, which had been to consult the resident haruspex, and then do nothing. In any case, having begun that way, they were obliged to end that way. The extent to which this aided Federer is arguable. He remains the reigning and uncontested monarch of roofed tennis, but this owes as much to the consistent low bounce than to the absence of curious meteorological phenomena like drizzle and zephyrs. Indian Wells was merely the most recent display of his aptitude in high winds.

During the break between matches the roof cracked open, and a dazzling line of sunshine began to expand and encompass the court. The camera tilted up, revealing a clearing sky, with vast and surely edible cumulous towers rolling through a field of Titian blue (dissolving cirrus wisps arrived later). It seemed like an omen. No one could say for whom, unless they were British, in which case it was assumed that it would necessarily favour Andy Murray's opponent, regardless of who that might be. With minutes to go before the players appeared on court, ripples of speculation furrowed outward across the Wimbledon grounds, betting markets quivered, and otherwise stiff upper lips trembled. Murray's Mound – the traditionally alliterative hillock upon which British fans congregate in order to celebrate their compatriots' semifinal failures – had been awash with umbrellas during Federer's victory, but these had vanished. The mood remained upbeat, for all that the introduction of weather would clearly favour Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, as would the location, the scoring system and the gods, busy elsewhere. Murray had not reached a Wimbledon final in 74 years, back when his name was apparently Bunny. (It's possible I wasn't paying close attention, and Simon Reed was rather going on.) Nor had any Frenchman contested a Wimbledon final in 15 years, since Cedric Pioline pushed Pete Sampras for almost four games. But one of them – Murray or Tsonga – would be obliged by fate and the propulsive structure of tournament play to progress, unless they formed a gentleman's agreement not to, thereby voiding all betting markets.

Through the first two sets, Murray's demeanour remained gentlemanly and collected even as he carved his opponent to pieces. He was impeccable on serve, fleet over the hardening turf, and deft and stylish on passing shots. No trip forward was safe for Tsonga, especially if he strove to gain the forecourt behind his serve. Murray's returning was everything that Djokovic's hadn't been short hours earlier. Tsonga pulled off some impressive half-volleys, despite a curiously brickish technique, but having to do so repeatedly was only going to end one way. And it quickly became apparent that giving Murray a forehand pass to run at was suicidal, except to Tsonga, who lacks a coach to explain to him that the law of averages isn't a thing, at least within the context of a tennis match. Murray can make those shots all day, and set about proving it.

The mood on Murray's Mound rose, although it was as ever laced with dread. After all, how can British hearts be broken if Murray didn't first build a lead? Those who have never known hope cannot know true despair. The dread deepened in the third, as the Scot's momentum slackened. This is traditionally his cue to fade away entirely, although it was worth pointing out that he traditionally faces Rafael Nadal at this stage. This was merely Tsonga, who had never displayed any aptitude for unlikely comebacks from two sets down at Wimbledon. The English commentator helpfully reminded us of Tsonga's unlikely comeback from two sets down at Wimbledon last year, against Federer, thereby dialling up the native dread up to a more acceptable level.

Well behind, Tsonga's endeavours grew reckless, and for a while it paid off, although he still spent a lot of time lounging on the grass watching winners curl by. He spent even more time there, doubled over, after Murray probed the Frenchman's crotch with frankly ungentlemanly vigour, thus guaranteeing a welter of ball-related puns across various forms of social media, and later proving that American tennis sites are uncomfortable with the word 'testicle', either singularly or in the plural. Naff euphemism abounded. Although Tsonga did recover sufficiently to serve out the third set, he was clearly discomfited, and for a time at the beginning of the fourth set his decision-making went awry, although he has admittedly spent his career demonstrating a capacity to make poor decisions without first undergoing blunt-force castration. He blew a useful chance to maintain momentum in the fourth with some ill-advised two-fisted backhands, and sought to correct this by removing his left hand from the racquet, which didn't help at all.

Murray, unusually unflappable astride a surge of national terror, was again on top, although he couldn't quite gain the vital break. But then, with Tsonga serving at 5/6, the Scot pounced, and English hearts quailed at the reality that he might actually win. Tsonga dumped a simple volley into the net, and it was 15/40. Cometh the hour, cometh

the return, and the grinding hours of Ivan Lendl's tutelage bore fruit with a last, fearless forehand crosscourt, dispatching a worthy Tsonga slider onto the far sideline. Murray dropped his racquet and pressed his hands to his face. But it was called out. The call had been swallowed in the roar, but it was there. Eventually Murray challenged, after a sufficient delay that British fans should give thanks that Kader Nouni wasn't presiding. Tsonga lent on the net, flashing his beautiful smile. Murray grinned back, a study in raw anxiety. Hawkeye revealed an elliptical black dot smeared across the outer half of a line. Centre Court erupted, and the players embraced. Murray lifted his face to the sky, and ambled out into the middle of the playing surface, fighting a private battle to dam the tears spilling over. The United Kingdom allowed itself a moment's respite from its indefatigable consternation, but Murray, somehow, was alone, gazing straight up.

The broadcasters didn't allow the moment to last. A statue of Fred Perry appeared on screen, accompanied by a reminder that Murray would face Federer in the final. A long day has passed since then, and the elation has already been revised downward, and given way to the certainty that Murray cannot beat the Swiss. Some have suggested that his only chance lies with having the roof open, sunlight apparently being Federer's kryptonite. I'm neither overly convinced by Federer's clear favouritism, nor by the delicacy of his calibration. Really, the idea that Federer's serve is so much more potent indoors has little statistical basis in fact, for all that Richard Krajicek, writing in *The Guardian*, insists otherwise. Of course, everyone's serve is aided by still conditions, but Federer has repeatedly demonstrated that his serve is *less* affected by wind than other players. Recall the US Open quarterfinal in 2010, when he carved through Robin Soderling as though they weren't conducting the match in a gale.

No, I expect the match to be close regardless of whatever doom might be divined from the entrails, whether the roof is open, closed, or on fire. The final will be close because I suspect Murray is no longer the same man as the one who lost nine straight sets in Major finals. I don't know if he will win, since Federer is actually pretty good at tennis, and is pursuing some fairly important goals of his own. But I know he can win, and I have a feeling we will be treated to the finest Wimbledon final since 2009. If that inspires any hope, beware. That way lies despair.

One, Seven, Seventeen

Wimbledon, Final

(3) Federer d. (4) Murray, 4/6 7/5 6/3 6/4

The most pressing issue facing anyone determined to talk about Roger Federer's era-sundering victory in today's Wimbledon final is deciding in what order to sprinkle his latest assortment of accomplishments onto what is already an imposing heap. Sundered eras – shattered epochs by another name – tend to produce piles of rubble anyway, but Federer's mound of achievements is still easy enough to pick out. Just follow the lifted gaze of those around you. Everyone is staring up at it, even those who'd prefer to set it on fire. On the very top is a jumble of golden Wimbledon trophies, each capped by a tiny and anachronistic pineapple, like Kipling a memento from an imperial age. A large crane has just dropped the seventh of these into place.

I will therefore go with this order: Federer has now won his seventh Wimbledon title, his seventeenth Slam, and has regained the world No.1 ranking for the first time since June 2010. As anticipated, he has also become the first man to achieve this feat while his father wore a red baseball cap bearing his son's monogram. He is also the first man to do it under a roof. A seventh Wimbledon title of course ties Federer with Pete Sampras, while his eight finals push him past anyone. Seventeen majors is also three clear of Sampras' old mark, set way back in halcyon 2002, when the internet was still more pornography than cats. Furthermore, Federer will now inevitably surpass the American's record of 286 weeks atop the ATP rankings. If anyone could empathise with Andy Murray's desolation afterwards, it was Pistol Pete, who throughout his career always maintained a strong line in empathy.

Then again, sympathy for Murray hardly hinged on witnessing your place in history being eclipsed. It just required a heart fashioned from any substance more yielding than flint. Before the match, my television aired a short, leaden-handed, American-produced documentary that systemically interviewed every resident of Dunblane, who turned out to be unanimous in their faith that their most famous native son would by winning Wimbledon achieve final closure for the school massacre of 1996. If the aim was to make British support a moral issue, it worked. Yet again, one's journey towards absurdity ended in the discovery that some Americans had arrived there first, propelled entirely by earnestness. Among the many messages, one was clear: Federer might arguably be the world's most beloved tennis player, but he wasn't the good guy today, no matter how many numbers he was chasing. The only number Murray, and by extension Great

Britain, were interested in was one. One Wimbledon singles title for one British man. That way they could move beyond 1936. 1936 is old news.

Nonetheless, according to the betting markets, and any number of shoddily non-definitive online polls, picking the bad guy to win in four sets was the safe option. I received a message before the match asking for my prediction, with the qualification that I wasn't allowed to pick Federer in four. With the default response closed to me, I realised I had no idea – those teary Dunblane burghers had me spooked – and admitted as much. Furthermore, I firmly believed that the version of Murray who boasted a winning record against Federer would make something more than a token appearance today, for all that he has historically shied away from the brightest spotlights. Meanwhile on my television, the vision cut away to a pub somewhere in Scotland where pale people were failing to contain themselves, then back to SW19, where two very healthy men were strolling purposefully onto a tennis court. The taller one was holding a racquet, and looking sternly intent.

This was the Murray that decided the first set, and that imposed himself for all but one game of the second, which was unfortunately its very last game. Federer commenced nervously, sealing the break of his own serve in the first game with a stiff drive volley beyond the open court. But Murray was relentless, fearless with his pace and bold with his depth. Federer's unforced error tally began rapidly to mount, though he recovered the early break. It was tight, and the Centre Court crowd, largely in accord with the good folk of Dunblane, roared their approval as Murray saved break points in the eighth game, and then broke, and served it out. It was his first set in a Major final, and he deserved it. By the standards of a Federer match, it had taken an eternity. The second went by quicker – there were actual love holds – but Murray was still on top. This time it was Federer's turn to fight off break points late. At 6/5, he broke Murray to steal the set, capping the achievement with a pair of sumptuous grass-court points, each proving that immense variety is possible even between successive drop volleys. The roof was still open, and momentum had shifted. One set all, but Federer was clearly ahead.

Much will be made – indeed, has been made – of the closing of the roof at 1/1 in the third set. Mostly what has been made is much ado in spades, heaping up the evidence that roof closure unfairly favoured the Swiss. General consensus holds that Federer grows into an unplayable colossus when protected from the fierce sky, since he is otherwise diminished by an undiagnosed agoraphobia. His lauded equanimity is apparently vulnerable to the merest breeze. Indoors, though, he's a juggernaut, a thing of darkness, luridly spot-lit. He seemed rejuvenated after returning from the break. But

it's worth pointing out that he was already looking refreshed before the drizzle deepened into a downpour. It came when he broke audaciously to grab that second set.

Thereafter Federer was hardly unplayable – Murray played him close – but he was the Federer that Wimbledon remembers. As John Newcombe would say, this was the Federer of 'four or five years ago'. In fact, John Newcombe did say that, repeatedly, and Todd Woodbridge proved powerless to stop him. Now it was Murray holding on. Frequently he was holding onto parts of his own anatomy – back, leg, nothing lewd – always a sure sign that the Scot is in some trouble. The key moments came in the sixth game, enough of them that they stretched it out to a 20-minute, ten-deuce epic, in which Murray fell over a lot and saved a commendable five of six break points. But he didn't save the sixth. Soon it was two sets to one.

The break in the fourth set was entirely in keeping with the run of play. The IBM Slamtracker's handy momentum bar, an almost unreadable way of presenting us with information we already know, concurred. It didn't tell us that Federer broke with a dismissive backhand riposte at his closing opponent, but luckily the pictures did. Murray could feel it slipping away, and his self-reproach gained its customary bitter edge. The camera swung over Murray's Mound, inspiring a desultory cheer. When the chance to be shown on the Jumbotron cannot induce fans to caper like lunatics, then you know their despair is consuming. They weren't alone. How could one not feel for Murray, even as he slipped to that dark place in which the crowd's desperate adulation helps less than it hinders? When Murray's final forehand pass – his money shot – landed barely wide on match point, it might have warranted a challenge, but he had none left. There was nothing left.

Federer collapsed to the court. In a moment, he was again the world No.1 and Wimbledon champion. The new epoch felt suspiciously like an old one. The new omelette tasted uncannily familiar. The crowd had by now spent an entire set cleansing their palates, and were cheering wildly. They cheered for both players. Murray looked wearily and tearfully numb, retaining only enough energy to punch the next person who suggested that Nadal's early exit had ultimately enabled anything more than a deeper heartache. The Wimbledon presentation can be a pompous and impersonal affair, and to Murray, striving for an exquisite eternity to contain his tears, while the stadium around him broke down, it might have felt cruel. It occurred to me that by spacing the players so far apart – Federer loitered at the net, while Murray gulped steadying breaths by the baseline – Federer was unable to bestow a spontaneous hug on his opponent, even if he'd wanted to. Murray was alone among his millions. Eventually he gathered himself,

and spoke briefly but movingly. Obligated to watch helplessly from the stands, those members of his camp not named Ivan Lendl were a mess.

Federer took the microphone, and, mercifully, didn't seek to ameliorate Murray's pain by claiming he knew just how the Scot felt. Instead, he proved typically eloquent in elaborating upon how he himself felt. It turned out he felt pretty good. His twin girls were fluttering tiny hands at their dad by this time, as were the grown-ups pressed close about them, including Roger's father Robert in his lucky red cap. Their man once spent half a decade at the top of the sport, and now he's back. And he doesn't have to decide whether 1 or 7 or 17 means more. He has them all.

Squandered Potential, Plays Well

A gauzy lassitude blankets men's tennis this week, which also happens to be Roger Federer's 286th week as the world's top player. Admittedly the degree to which one finds it smothering will depend on your preferences regarding the top players, and towards those already reapplying themselves in Stuttgart, Båstad, Umag and Newport. Fans of the new No.1 are doubtless content to bask and purr a while longer. Fans of Cedrik Marcel Stebe have been looking forward to this short stretch all year, this tiny assortment of clay tournaments so inconsequential that it defies even the ATP's attempts to market it badly. This is Stebe's time to shine. These few clay tournaments, wedged artlessly between Wimbledon and the US hardcourts, have never made a great deal of sense, assuming that sense is something a tennis calendar has to make. This year, with the grass court Olympics only weeks away, they make even less sense. Still, Båstad is worth tuning in to merely for the setting, as attractive as anywhere on the tour, although it is, sadly, exactly one Robin Soderling short.

Assuming Novak Djokovic doesn't scrounge up 76 ranking points in the next ten days, Federer will next week break the all-time record for weeks at No.1, currently held by Pete Sampras. Already this week he has apparently achieved some kind of record for consecutive media appearances. I know this because a number of media reports have now appeared to tell us how much media Federer is doing. You know it's a slow week when the media starts marvelling at itself. And now I'm marvelling at that. Before ennui overwhelms us all, I'll marvel at something else. I'll say random things about Wimbledon.

Nary a Dry Eye

'Ladies and Gentlemen, the Wimbledon Gentleman's Singles Champion 2012, Roger Federer!' It was a mystery why the MC duties for the men's final trophy presentation were given to someone who apparently doesn't follow the sport. He sounded far too old to be the work experience kid.

Aside from that, the presentation had its share of stirring moments, depending on one's tastes. Sadists who relish the spectacle of a lean Scotsman falling to collect himself for a painful eternity – a niche fetish, as these things go – were well served. Murray remained unmade for an uncomfortably long time, which rendered his eventual rally all the more poignant, especially when he broke down again upon thanking his supporters. The unsayable Roger Federer bestowed a hug on him after that, with the free arm that wasn't clutching a hefty, pineapple-themed trophy. He was Single Handed Champion of the World, after all.

Wanting, and found tested

Reproducing last year's success was always going to test **Bernard Tomic**. In 2011, as an 18-year-old, he became the youngest Wimbledon quarterfinalist in 25 years. Losing in the first round as a 19-year-old turned out to be an altogether lesser achievement. The Australian media proved typically eager to explore the difference fully, presumably as a way of coming to terms with the despair induced when no other Australians progressed past the second round. Lleyton Hewitt, it was felt, had just suffered a typically tough draw. Sam Stosur, the world No.5 and reigning US Open champion, had outdone herself merely to win a round on grass. But Tomic was the great hope. Wasn't he supposed to be No.1 by now?

Tomic quickly conceded that he hadn't done enough work, and that he was entirely to blame for the desultory loss to David Goffin. (It wasn't reported to what extent Goffin agreed with this assessment.) This tallied well with the prevailing local sentiment – tales of squandered potential play well here – and so he was subsequently applauded for his contrition, and held up at least once as an example of how honest self-appraisal will reveal the clear path forward, a perfect example of confusing words for deeds. It is to Tomic's credit that he has worked hard enough elsewhere that while his ranking has dropped, it hasn't been cataclysmic. He remains in the top 50, for now, but securing a US Open seeding will require more than good intentions, self-flagellation and cunningly wrought strategies. He'll probably have to win some matches on the US hardcourts.

Milos Raonic has demonstrated a knack for winning matches on US hardcourts, although he traditionally flourishes earlier in the season, preferring to spend the summer recovering from hip surgery. What he hasn't demonstrated is a capacity to win on the Wimbledon grass, in direct contravention of everyone's stentorian pronouncements that he should never lose. He was probably unlucky to discover a resurgent Sam Querrey this year, but top players are top players because an unlucky early round match is merely testing rather than disastrous. Plenty of people selected Raonic as their outside shot at winning the title, assuming the top three were otherwise indisposed. Failing that, it was at least expected that the Canadian would progress the farthest of all his peers. I suppose he did, so long as you don't consider Goffin a peer, on account of him being, um, Belgian. Like Grigor Dimitrov and Ryan Harrison, Raonic progressed all the way to the second round. Once there he not only finished his match (unlike Dimitrov), he actually won a set. The sky is the limit, of course, but it's still the sky, and far away.

Brian Baker is 27, and therefore the oldest youngster in world tennis right now, with the possible exception of Tommy Haas. Baker reached the fourth round, where his dream run was cut short by Philipp Kohlschreiber, who is usually more likely to facilitate other player's dreams by losing spectacularly. Baker has now proved he can play on clay and grass. It's hard to imagine he can't perform on US hardcourts, especially since he isn't playing in the Olympics, and will be able to feast on anaemic draws laid out across the breadth of the continental United States.

The quiet American is now ranked No.76, and thus he won't have to qualify for the US Open. Direct entry will undoubtedly seem like a bewildering luxury to Baker, who has grown accustomed to turning up at tournaments a week early, although it's probably more accurate to say he still isn't used to turning up at all. He will end the year inside the top 50, mark my words. Assuming his body holds together – his name is hardly a by-word for physical sturdiness – then it is entirely possible that he could be seeded for the Australian Open. Imagine that. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Spun Gold

My favourite commentary moment came from Mark Petchey, a man who once comforted us with the news that 'We now have so many memories we can never forget'. This unforgettable memory came while Petchey was sharing a booth with John McEnroe and Tim Henman, although I cannot recall which match they were calling. One of the players executed a fine volley, which I suppose is remarkable enough given the current state of the tour. This was Petchey's cue to launch into a disquisition on the finer points of volleying technique. Henman's prowess at the net was fundamental to his perennial top-

ten ranking. McEnroe's forecourt genius propelled him to No.1, and seven Major titles. Petchey peaked at No.80, which is respectable, but hardly comparable. He never broke into the top 100 in doubles.

It was rather like seeing someone stumble into the grandmothers-only session at an egg-sucking convention, only to knock down the key-note speaker and snatch away her microphone. It was delightful.

A Smacked Gob

In January we marvelled when Leander Paes and Radek Stepanek defeated the Bryan Brothers to snatch the Australian Open doubles title. Jonathan Marray and Frederik Nielsen have won Wimbledon, thereby surpassing at a canter that earlier achievement, if only for sheer audacity. Four of their six matches went to five sets. Quite incredibly, their only straight sets win came against the team of Karlovic and Moser, which was also the only match that didn't feature a tiebreak (the others all featured at least two each). Marray and Nielsen defeated the Bryans in the semifinals (6/4 7/6 6/7 7/6), and Lindstedt and Tecau in the final. This is the first career title for both of them.

Like the rest of us, they still cannot believe it.

Interlude

These Callow Brutes

Båstad, Semifinals

(1) Ferrer d. (6) Dimitrov, 6/2 7/5

I am always intrigued by the odd narratives that congeal around a given tennis player.

David Ferrer won his fiftieth match of 2012 in luscious Båstad today, although I should clear up any grammatical confusion by pointing out that only three of these victories actually occurred in luscious Båstad, and only one of them happened today. He is the first man to achieve this feat, in Sweden or not. The fiftieth win (Båstad, today) came against Grigor Dimitrov, who played the Spaniard close for a set, but then collapsed meekly, an eternally popular strategy with young players. This result seemingly bears out one of the commonly cherished ideas about Ferrer, which is that as far as Dimitrov and his peers are concerned, the Spaniard remains an unpassable yet highly mobile barrier to the elite level, a lethally-efficient sentry, patrolling the grounds with tireless attention, and a crossbow. The callow brutes have grown belligerent, but for now a stern talking-to is invariably enough to scare them off, especially when it is delivered in sufficiently rapid Spanish.

Available statistics appear to bear this assumption out. In the last twelve months, Ferrer had tough words with young players ten times, and only once did one of them actually stand his ground, and then for no longer than a set.⁹ Three times he was pushed to a tiebreaker (always against Milos Raonic), without dropping any. He saw off Raonic, Dimitrov, Bernard Tomic and Kei Nishikori, among others. (I can extend this timeframe by another month to include his victory over Ryan Harrison at last year's Wimbledon, in which Ferrer dropped two sets and a tiebreaker, although he did defeat the then-22 Benoit Paire in straight sets the round before.) Being statistics, these numbers are of course misleading.

The fact is that unless you're ranked above him, Ferrer hardly loses at all. In the course of compiling this year's fifty wins, he has contrived to lose nine times, but only twice to someone ranked lower than himself (Denis Istomin at Indian Wells, and Thomaz Bellucci in Monte Carlo). Yet he is 1-7 against the top four, with the only victory coming over Andy Murray at the French Open. He often plays Murray close, and Djokovic. But he has

⁹ A young player is here defined as under 23 years.

never beaten Federer in several thousand attempts, and takes sets from Nadal only slightly more often than he wins matches. If nothing else, it suggests that his ranking of No.5 is perfect, although really he could as easily be ranked at six or seven. I assume he would be, had Robin Soderling's sojourn ended sooner. (This is a fitting moment for such a contention, since it is almost precisely twelve months ago that the Swede thrashed Ferrer in the Båstad final.) Owing to the structure of tournament draws, Ferrer rarely collides with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga or Tomas Berdych at larger events. He has beaten Juan Martin del Potro twice this year with little difficulty, or, rather, with exactly the kind of difficulty he relishes. What is truly amazing about Ferrer is the barely remitting consistency with which he plays to his abilities.

On the other hand, the bellicose youths aren't exactly making Ferrer's alleged role difficult. Their version of crashing the party mostly involves standing around in the front garden, begging to be allowed in. After today's matches at Newport and Båstad, players born in 1991 or later are a combined 0-9 in ATP level semifinals. This group includes Harrison, Tomic, Dimitrov and Krajinović. (Again there's statistical trickery afoot. Extending the timeframe would see Raonic and Nishikori included, both of whom have won titles. But for anyone pushing a barrow, stats are a useful way to grease the squeaky wheel.)

For all of them besides Raonic, the main issue seems to be pace. Their shots don't have enough, and Ferrer's feet have too much. Dimitrov today couldn't get enough balls past Ferrer, particularly on clay. He couldn't serve big enough for long enough, although I suppose one might dub some of his unaccountably slow first serves change-ups, if one were feeling charitable. Too often the Bulgarian's attack slackened when too many good shots came back – about two – which Ferrer rightly treated as an invitation to move up, from which point he hardly ever relinquished control. Dimitrov strengths are considerable, but few of them are defensive.

Nor are they mental. In the second set, serving at 4/5, Ferrer fell to 15-40. Dimitrov blew both set points with poor backhand returns. From there he never looked in it, and was broken the next game. He lost the match on yet another crosscourt backhand exchange, with the last tumbling flaccidly into the net. It is far too early to call Dimitrov the best player yet to win a title. That accolade probably belongs to Julien Benneteau for the moment. But it is something for him to aim for. To avoid it, he'll probably need a generous draw that lacks David Ferrer.

Newport, Semifinals

(1) Isner d. (6) Harrison, 7/6 6/3

Some hours later on a remote continent Ryan Harrison fared no better when faced with John Isner, although the problem was a radically different one, originating from a loftier place, plummeting terrifyingly, and scooting through disturbingly when it connected with the surface, which was cunningly fashioned from thousands of blades of grass. It was a problem perfectly tailored to Harrison's particular weakness, which is that he is not very good at returning tennis balls when they are served at him. He certainly would have fared better returning Ferrer's serve than Isner's, whereupon he would have lost more quickly but no less thoroughly. But the Spaniard apparently missed his connecting flight, and the younger American was obliged to play the hand he was dealt. It was a very large hand, and it was holding a howitzer aimed at his chest. What can you do?

Not much, but he still could have played it better, especially in the tiebreak. He could have watched Benjamin Becker earlier in the week, whose upset of Milos Raonic reflected an astute appraisal of the Newport surface, which responds well to low slices, in much the same way that very tall men do not. Instead he supplied Isner with any number of waist-high balls, which Isner gleefully dispatched into the corners. If Harrison found himself at the net, or – more problematically – if Isner found him there, then the balls went past him faster and at waist height. It was a different view, at least. I suppose in the end it didn't matter much. Harrison won three points on Isner's first serve, and although not all of those were unreturned, a lot of them were – enough that he finished with a perfect 0/0 return on break points.

Harrison is now 0/5 in ATP semifinals. He played David Ferrer in none of them. But his time will come. And Ferrer will be waiting.

Tantalisingly Here

Several hours ago, the clocks in London reached midnight, and Roger Federer commenced his 287th week as the world's highest ranked tennis player. As with so much else, he is the only man to have done this. As I write, Federer's clothing sponsor Nike has released a limited run of recoloured *Zoom Vapor RF* shoes. There are 287 pairs, and each costs \$287. I expect Nike's online store crashed within seconds. This probably isn't the most important record that Federer holds, but it is the one that somehow remained tantalisingly near even as it receded agonisingly, and thus the one by which his legion fans would most readily be reduced to gibbering incoherence. It is, consequently, kind of a big deal.

The first 200 or so weeks were easy. Once Federer had ascended to the top spot by defeating Juan Carlos Ferrero in the semifinal of the 2004 Australian Open, displacing Andy Roddick, he rapidly built and maintained a points-lead so vast that it was almost without precedent. By the conclusion of that year the question was already being posed seriously of how he might ever lose, even injured. The documentary of the Tennis Masters Cup for that year was called *Facing Federer*, with the implied subtitle being 'Why Bother?' He had spent less than a year at the top, but his position there already seemed eternal. There was just that quality to it, such that few even doubted whether he would be able to back it up in 2005. In any case, it turned out no one could face him in Houston, and he ended the year with almost double the points of the No.2, who for the last time was Roddick. Federer was on a finals winning streak that would last another year, and would eventually extend to 24 straight victories.

Rafael Nadal 'arrived' in 2005, for many fans seemingly from nowhere, although he had finished 2004 at No.51, having snared his first title in Sopot, Poland. (A perusal of Wikipedia suggests that this is among the more fascinating things to have happened in Sopot, although I note it boasts the longest wooden pier in Europe, and has been sacked by every passing army.) With the Sopot pier acting as some kind of springboard, Nadal would attain the No.2 ranking in July of 2005, and remain there for 160 consecutive weeks, which remains a record. Federer and Nadal would occupy the two top spots for over three years, long enough that this configuration came to feel like a structural requirement of the sport, if only to casual fans.

In January of 2008 Federer arrived in Australia to the strenuously asserted revelation that his ranking was somehow at risk. The numbers had been crunched, and it was discovered that if Nadal won in Melbourne and Federer failed to reach the quarterfinals, then they would swap positions. Without exception, every interview was now about that. Federer was visibly irritated by this line of questioning, and on the face of it, it *did* seem ludicrous. In 2007 he had, again, won three of the four Majors, and had reached the final of the other one. He'd finished the year with another dominant victory at the Masters Cup. And yet he was somehow one lousy day away from losing No.1. In order to ensure this wouldn't happen, he promptly contracted glandular fever, and fell in the semifinals to Novak Djokovic. The extent to which these two events are related remains a subject of debate, but not a terribly interesting one.

Federer's results were relatively poor through the US Spring of 2008 – Guillermo Cañas had already fractured his dominance there a year earlier – and the clay season, although he managed to snag his first title of the year in (idyllic) Estoril. The talk of decline had commenced, and it has never stopped, although it periodically swells to a roar and

recedes to a mutter, seasonally and comfortingly. He was beaten by Nadal in the Hamburg final, and then scourged by him at Roland Garros. A month later Nadal took his Wimbledon title, and with it, before long, the No.1 ranking. Federer had reigned for 237 consecutive weeks, eclipsing Jimmy Connors' old record by 77 weeks. Although a measure of redemption came when he won his fifth US Open title, he finished the year at No.2, and only ten points clear of Djokovic. The discourse of decline was inescapable, and conducted at a bellow.

Federer reclaimed the No.1 ranking 46 weeks after it was torn away, not for the last time discovering it to be nicely packaged with a recovered Wimbledon trophy and the all-time record for Major titles. He finished 2009 as No.1 for the fifth time, and became the second man in the Open Era to reclaim the year end No.1 spot (Ivan Lendl did it in 1989, while Nadal later achieved it in 2010). Federer would extend that lead by winning the Australian Open at the beginning of 2010. But two losses from match point up in the US Spring, as well as upsets to Albert Montanes and Ernests Gulbis on clay would have serious ramifications. Winning any one of those matches might have meant his ranking would survive the subsequent loss to Robin Soderling at Roland Garros, at least until Wimbledon. (This quarterfinal loss also halted Federer's record run of consecutive major semifinals at 23, which is probably the most astounding of his obscure records.) Federer was stranded on 285 total weeks at No.1. Pete Sampras held the record on 286 weeks. If it had ended this way, it might have remained poetic in its imperfection, akin to Sir Donald Bradman getting out for a duck in his final innings, and ending his Test career with an average of 99.94.

Although Federer would go on to lose in the quarterfinals of Wimbledon, and heartbreakingly in the semifinals of the US Open to Djokovic, he would end 2010 with a dominant display indoors, with titles in Stockholm, Basel and in London at the Tour Finals. On the face of it this little run seems inconsequential, but it ultimately proved invaluable. Federer's latest return to the No.1 ranking finally happened at Wimbledon a week ago, after a gap of over two years, but the foundations were laid at the end of 2011, as he endured the entire European indoors without defeat, including a maiden title at the Paris Masters, and a record sixth at the Tour Finals. These were augmented this year with Masters titles in Indian Wells and Madrid, as well as 500-level trophies in Rotterdam and Dubai, where he apparently had no other purpose than to ruin Juan Martin del Potro's year.

If Federer ends this year as the No.1 player, it will be the sixth time he has done so. It isn't even particularly unlikely, given that he has far fewer points to defend than Nadal or Djokovic during the US Summer, and has amply demonstrated his unsurpassed indoor

prowess. Having said that, the last few months have proved that not only *can* anything happen, it usually will. Still, any men who insisted that *this* could happen following the US Open last year would have been ritually humiliated at some length, before being chemically castrated lest their moronic genes be passed on to others. (Now who's laughing? Probably not those guys.) In fact, Federer was ranked No.4 behind Andy Murray as recently as last November, which he spent airily dismissing the Scot's recent domination of the Asian swing. To his innumerable detractors, it seemed clear that the accelerating decline had well and truly ascended to a frenzy of sour grapes (which when left too long in the sun foments, and can be supplemented with fruit to form a kind of undrinkable, spritzzy Sangria).

I will resist the temptation to extend and sustain the wine metaphor any further. A lesser man would cave, and lunge for the easy champagne reference. Indeed, to do so would be entirely in keeping with Federer's bio that appears on the ATP website, which asserts that he has 'a flair for aesthetics and class,' whatever that means. (Knowing that line was probably written with a straight face only makes it harder to maintain one while reading it.) Among other things, Federer's greatness makes him the easiest of athletes to wax hyperbolic about, a trap countless greater and lesser scribes have willingly hurled themselves into. But beyond the hosannas and panegyrics, it is hard for anyone writing about him not to fall back on the endless numbers. Like him or not, it takes a certain calibre of wilfulness to pretend these don't add up to something quite imposing, if not magnificent. And beyond the fives and sevens and seventeens, the largest and latest number is 287, and it is made up of lots and lots of ones.

A Day in the Life

I read the news today (oh boy) about an unlucky man whose knees had failed. And though the news was rather sad, some folks just had to laugh. They posted photographs.

It is difficult to convey to the younger generation what a limited and inadequate thing Schadenfreude was before the internet elevated it into a defining principle, and granted a voice to those small spirits who had, with some reason, hitherto been denied one. The capacity to extract delight from the hardship of others is hardly a modern invention; cruelty was a staple of antiquity, and not all the tales of what went on in the Colosseum are untrue. But what was once a scattered archipelago of mean-spiritedness has been joined up via an extensive dredging project into an endless spit, a term that hopefully conveys something of the regurgitative quality of what has consequently been thrown up.

I received the news that Rafael Nadal had withdrawn from the London Olympics at about 5.30am this morning. I confess my immediate reaction was not one of disbelief. It seemed plausible enough. His knees are a mess. My uncontroversial assumption was that this must have been a horrible decision for Nadal to have to make. He was to carry the Spanish flag in the opening ceremony. He was the defending gold medallist from Beijing. I imagine he was gutted. A quick search yielded the actual announcement, and I didn't need to imagine it. He *was* gutted. For whatever reason, I decided to put off a return to sleep, and instead probed the internet for further information. I immediately regretted this decision. Where I'd taken Nadal at his word, others expressed only scepticism. Where I'd seen a devastated Nadal, others somehow saw a dissembling one. The conspiracy theorists were having a day out.

The theories have predictably ranged from the unrepeatably nasty to the ludicrous. This latter quality covers the suggestion that Nadal has deliberately withdrawn from the Olympics in order to focus his attentions on the Canadian Masters, having carefully measured the pride he would take in bearing the Spanish flag against the satisfaction engendered by potentially avenging last year's early loss to Ivan Dodig. Having coolly weighed it all up, he apparently decided that Dodig represents unfinished business that simply cannot be ignored, whereas as he already has a gold medal. Athletes are notoriously disinterested in winning multiple gold medals. I'm not sure you're even allowed to have more than one.

Other theorists, vouchsafed a vision of the world's deep structures, have suggested Nadal's latest withdrawal cleaves to a shadowy template. After suffering an upset at Roland Garros in 2009 he withdrew from the next big event, which was Wimbledon. In light of his defeat to Lukas Rosol some weeks ago, he is now compelled to withdraw from the Olympics. (The pattern seems clear enough, although it doesn't explain why he was playing the week after losing to Dodig last year, given that the Canadian Open is apparently so big a deal that it is worth skipping the Olympics for.) Clearly there are subtleties at play here beyond my ken. But who could put such machinations past Uncle Toni, a tactician whose powers of foresight are so mighty that he cruelly forced young Rafael to play left-handed so that he could one day tarnish the legacy of an as-yet-unknown Swiss junior? You couldn't write it, unless you are Dan Brown, for whom nothing is unwritable, merely unreadable.

Leaving to one side the legions of Nadal faithful for whom this heavy blow was hardly softened through being dreaded, various timid souls have essayed the entirely radical theory that the Spaniard was telling the truth: his knees have in fact not recovered sufficiently from the treatment, and he therefore isn't able to compete to the best of his

abilities. Some have taken him at his word, and have applauded his decision to withdraw now, thereby freeing up a spot on the Spanish team, and allowing someone else to haul *la Rojigualda* into the Olympic Stadium in a week's time. All told, countless thousands have no trouble imagining how gutted Nadal must feel. They feel it, too. Even for those who don't there must surely be some concession that his absence is a blow to the Olympic event.

I saw a film today (oh boy) the world No.3 had just withdrawn. A crowd of people turned away, but I just had to look, having read the book. Eventually I stopped looking, closed my eyes, and returned to sleep.

A Miraculous Message

Hamburg, Final

(3) Monaco d. Haas, 7/5 6/4

For better or worse, online gambling on tennis is now an intrinsic part of the sport. This was clear enough during Channel 7's coverage of Wimbledon, which would periodically cross to the proprietor of a local betting site, who would justify his latest odds by dressing up common knowledge as dreary analysis, which in turn explained why his odds looked not unlike everyone else's. It was even clearer today after the Hamburg final, as tournament director Michael Stich's endless stream of German was periodically broken up by the phrase 'bet at home', three words that apparently want for Teutonic equivalents. Of course, bet-at-home is the tournament's primary sponsor. I presume at least some in the crowd lacked sufficient English that the sponsor's miraculous message was lost on them. The miraculous message is that you can now gamble on sports from anywhere, without undergoing acute soul-erosion in an actual betting parlour.

Closer to home - the home from which I may now safely conduct wagers - TAB Sportsbet proclaims itself to be Australia's premier sports betting organisation. I am privy to no market-share data that suggests otherwise, so will not quibble at their assertion. Sportsbet has for some time been running an advertising campaign in Australia extolling the various advantages of online gambling, the chief virtue of which is that discerning punters aren't obliged to consort with the weirdos who bet on sports *in situ*, archly implying that you somehow aren't one of them. This is a common enough conceit in advertising, but no less effective for that. It helps that anecdotal evidence from my youth bears it out. Betting parlours really are horrible.

Yet on some level the local TAB shop was a seductive space as a child, since I vaguely associated it with Tab cola, which was the diet Coke from before Diet Coke (though it was only ever supplied by adults who couldn't get the simplest things right, like buying actual Coke).¹⁰ I would peer expectantly into these TAB venues and would suddenly understand despair. If Tab cola didn't taste quite right, the local TAB just smelled wrong. The drink was disappointing, but this was something else. For many Australian children – though I assume this isn't limited to here – it was our first whiff of abject failure, and the tang of it was sour and male. Sometimes I'd spot men I knew in there, perhaps the father of a school friend. Only when I was older would I understand why little Jimmy Peterson only ever had water crackers for lunch.

Anyway, this was the reverie in which I lost myself as I watched the final of the *bet-at-home* Open in Hamburg, streamed live via the Bet365 website, during an ad for the new SkyBet app. I was saddened that my children would not know this experience. As our society is increasingly atomised by technology, the number of spaces in which grown men might congregate and discover they understand neither statistics nor horse racing, in the process bringing ruin to their families, are lessened. The local betting parlours, once filled with collective despair, are now empty with it. Is it wrong that I'm saddened by this? I doubt whether the Jimmy Petersons are eating any better. Anyway, onward to tennis.

Had Philipp Kohlschreiber defeated Nicolas Almagro in the *gamble-from-your-couch* Hamburg quarterfinals the other day, he would have entered the top twenty in the ATP rankings for the first time. It was an excellent opportunity for an exciting player, one who I number among my favourites. It would have been a worthy reward for a guy who has lately supplemented his capacity to belt winners with a determination to belt winners in. Alas, Kohlschreiber lost, and remains stranded at No.21, although this is still a career high ranking. To get over that top twenty hump you have to earn it. You also have to not get broken while attempting to stay in the set, twice. He also served for the second set, but was broken. Almagro served for the first, but was broken. It was that kind of match, although it was also the kind that is brim-full of glorious backhand rallies, suicidal trips to the net, and deft touch. The German came in more, which meant the Spaniard passed more. Almagro followed this up by losing to Juan Monaco in a tight semifinal.

A Kohlschreiber victory would also have been in keeping with the custom whereby Germans produce their best results at home (as opposed to, say, Stalingrad). Tommy

¹⁰ TAB stands for Totalisator Agency Board, amply evoking its whimsy.

Haas remains the custodian of this tradition. He moved through to the *wager-from-the-lavatory* Hamburg final with a fine win over Marin Cilic, although the Croatian phoned it in towards the end, presumably via the SkyBet app. Nonetheless, it was a vintage performance from Haas, recalling 1999, 2001, 2002, 2007 and 2009. He moved to a provisional ranking of No.35. You will recall he was compelled to qualify for the French Open, and that it was only by the grace of the AELTC that he wasn't required to do so at Wimbledon. If he'd won the Hamburg final he would have entered the top 30, meaning a seeding for the US Open. That's staggering, and owes in large part to stellar results on home soil, including the title in Halle, and a semifinal back in Munich. It's probably no coincidence that his only Masters series title came in Stuttgart (2001), during one of his early comebacks.

He didn't win, though he went down fighting. Monaco did win, also while fighting. It was a scrap, and a very entertaining one. Haas flew out to early leads in both sets, but was reined rapidly in each time. With the possible exception of Gilles Simon in the second round, Haas hadn't faced anyone as quick as Monaco this week, and it began to tell as the match wore on. The German was belting everything from both wings, but he was having a hell of time getting anything past his opponent, which has always proved the surest way to drive Tommy Haas round the bend. His wife began to scream at him to focus. Haas nodded. It was technically coaching, but at least he stopped tossing his racquet about for a bit.

It seemed clear that the epic seventh game of the second set would turn out to be pivotal. Haas fought off a succession of break points with daring net play (although the last of the exquisite drop volley winners was executed from near the service line), but Monaco eventually broke through. Then Haas broke back, sealing the eighth game with a ferocious backhand up the line. His animalistic bellow preceded the crowd's roar by only a moment. Then he was broken again, which was a bit deflating for the crowd, who didn't roar nearly so lustily. *This* turned out to be the pivotal moment. The Argentine served it out, and collapsed onto his back. It was his turn to roar, and then to dart away into the stands.

Haas won't re-enter the top thirty just yet, but Monaco will enter the top ten for the first time in his career. He is the eleventh Argentine to achieve this feat in the Open Era, and the third among active players. The *bet-your-home* Open German Tennis Championships is the biggest title of his career, notwithstanding that he was canonised as the US Men's Clay Court Champion as recently as April of this year. Perhaps most encouragingly of all, fears that the ankle injury Monaco sustained on Monte Carlo's treacherous red clay would wreck his good form – as injury did in 2007 – have proved to be unfounded.

There's no especially good reason to think he'll remain in the top ten for long, since the sparseness of points in that range make it something of a rankings trout-farm, but it's still a nice moment, and stranger things have happened. He and Haas received stylised propellers in lieu of trophies. No explanation was given.

The Olympics Games

Luck of the Draw: Olympics 2012

The first thing to be said about the draw for the Men's Singles event at the 2012 London Olympics is that Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic have not been drawn in the same half. This is in direct contravention of all known laws, whether contingent or immutable, physical or celestial. As a consequence, the second thing to be said is that at about a quarter past eleven in the morning (Greenwich Mean Time) on the twenty-sixth of July, the entire universe winked instantly out of existence, only to be replaced immediately by a nearly perfect copy of itself. Some of you might have experienced a slight jolt. That's normal.

Cults both apocalyptic and millenarian are united in their triumph at this turn of events – which they have since claimed was anticipated – although the former type has expressed some disappointment that it all went by with so little fanfare. (Was a little brimstone too much to expect? Brimstone had been promised, after all. And there were supposed to be virgins.) Anyway, as I say the new universe is an *almost* perfect copy of the old one. Discerning folks might notice that a few things have changed. Justin Bieber has been replaced as Secretary-General of the United Nations. Croissants are no longer confusingly star-shaped. Tommy Robredo isn't world No.1 anymore. And apparently the colour scheme at the Olympic tennis event has been revised. Only in an alternate universe could Wimbledon look like this.

In any case, there is a very good reason that Federer and Djokovic find themselves on opposing sides of the draw, even though the old universe lacked the operating software to handle it. They are ranked first and second, which from memory has never before been the case. The real issue therefore wasn't going to be that they wouldn't get to face off in the semifinals of a significant tournament. The real issue was which of the two will have to play Andy Murray (the answer is Djokovic), and who will Andy Murray have to play in order for this even to happen (the answer is everyone). As it was at The Championships, Murray's draw is a humdinger. He faces Stan Wawrinka first up, which should be almost as winnable as the second round match against Jarkko Nieminen. Then he'll likely take on Richard Gasquet and Tomas Berdych in order to get a crack at Djokovic. For British fans, disoriented by the overwhelming superiority of their cycling team, this is a welcome return to gloom. If only in the tennis event, the entire British Isles gets to be an apocalyptic cult. Doom is certain.

Djokovic himself has no good reason to be thrilled with the new universe. Firstly, Belgrade's homeless are no longer legally obliged to wear Srdjan's old t-shirts, each bearing an airbrushed image of Novak's face. Secondly, Djokovic's Olympics draw reflects a degree of difficulty almost equal to Murray's. He'll presumably have no trouble dispatching Fabio Fognini in the opening round, although knowing The Fog, if there is trouble, it'll be big trouble, roughly on par with that which Kurt Russell so famously visited on Little China. Assuming he survives this, Djokovic will probably face Andy Roddick, potentially one of the few men in the draw who can match the Serb for sheer patriotism. Then his path towards Murray will probably involve some unholy combination of Lleyton Hewitt, Marin Cilic, Milos Raonic, and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. Or someone else.

The corollary to all of this is that Federer's draw is utterly benign. This is of course something of a problem for his fans, who have once more been compelled to yield up the coveted underdog status before a ball has even been thwacked. Of course, it is only a few weeks since Federer proved to everyone's satisfaction that he can survive even easy draws. Nonetheless, some consolation can be found in the realisation that he faces Alejandro Falla in the first round, a man who two years held a two set to love lead over the great Swiss on Centre Court, and whose complexion will benefit enormously from the new colour scheme. Federer may face Julien Benneteau in the second round, who had him two sets to love down just weeks ago. Alternatively he might discover Mikhail Youzhny, who took five games from him in the Wimbledon quarterfinal. From there it actually gets easier. If one really must find something to worry about, then there's always the time-honoured convention that anything can happen in a best-of-three match on grass. Indeed it can. The top seed can even make it to the final.

Which brings me neatly to the question of how the other players will fare, those for whom the concept 'anything can happen' is intended to provide a measure of comfort. Astute draw analysts will recognise this as Stage Three in the standard model of any draw dissection. It's a nice, if potentially arousing question to ask who will penetrate farthest? As ever, the smart money is on Philipp Kohlschreiber, although I could have told you that without even seeing the draw, based on his masterful preparation which consists entirely of playing on clay in Austria. Now that I have seen the draw, I can say he will most likely face the fourth seeded David Ferrer in the second round, but don't believe an upset is entirely beyond reason. This is a new universe, you will recall (or you won't, as the case may be). Pencil the depressingly lone German in for a quarterfinal. He's good for it. I also have a feeling Berdych is vulnerable in early rounds right now, and that Ryan Harrison is the type to take advantage of this for precisely as long as he

doesn't quite realise what's happening. He won't get past Murray in the quarterfinals, but he'll cause a frightful row on the way there.

There are several opening round matches worth perusing, for the ambling ticket-holder given to idle *flânerie*, or to their fidgety online counterpart. Janko Tipsarevic and David Nalbandian didn't quite produce a classic in the first round at Wimbledon earlier in the month. With all of existence being reset earlier today, they've been gifted another crack at it. Bernard Tomic and Kei Nishikori will be intriguing, if only to see whether the Tomic's avowed commitment to doing hard work has translated into Tomic actually working hard.

Youzhny and Benneteau will, as mentioned, duel for the honour of stressing out a few Federer fans in the second round, but I suspect their match could be excellent in its own right. John Isner will attempt to break the ace record for a best-of-three match against Olivier Rochus – from memory it's 44 or 50 – although given his results on grass he should be happy merely to win, especially over a player as wily and stylish as the Belgian. Those who somehow dimly recall yesterday's old universe will be shocked to learn that Rochus is no longer 6'9", meaning his Belgian team uniform looks absurdly oversized. Watching him stumbling about in it should be a highlight of the opening ceremony.

Anything Can Happen

Olympic Games, Day One

Darcis d. (6) Berdych, 6/4 6/4

Giraldo d. Harrison, 7/5 6/3

It didn't take long for my contention that Tomas Berdych is currently vulnerable in early rounds to be proved correct, although my equally assured conviction that Ryan Harrison would be the one to demonstrate it turned out to be less accurate. The new universe we now inhabit isn't *precisely* like the old one – Karl Pilkington's once-conjoined twin Caroline Wozniacki has been separated and now dates a golfer – but nor is it *totally* different. Ryan Harrison remains perfectly capable of losing any tennis match for any reason he deems fit, and then throwing a big fat tantrum about it.

Some described Harrison's performance as indifferent, which is either inaccurate, or else provides us with some sense of how terrifying he must be when fully engaged. Even indifferent, he is an implacable enemy of his own equipment, and like others before him is determined to execute a private war against the elusive mole folk who dwell

under SW19, presumably distant kin of those who inconveniently raised that mound in the Olympic Stadium during the opening ceremony. Harrison's racquet closed the match with a double fault, the third, for which it was immediately and violently punished by having its brains dashed out on the grass. He has been roundly taken to editorial task over this. Within minutes his Wikipedia entry had been updated by a fan whose righteous indignation easily overreached his or her grammatical skill.¹¹

Setting aside the apparently important problem of Harrison murdering the odd tennis racquet – everyone has glossed over how much more taxing this is on grass than on hardcourt – there is the minor issue of what this might do to the surface. It's less a case of 'won't somebody please think of the children', than 'won't somebody please think of the court', although our thoughts of course remain with any injured or traumatised mole children. It was precisely the kind of attention the newly-reseeded Wimbledon courts don't need. Prior to the commencement of play, everyone had marvelled at how marvellous the courts looked just weeks after The Championships concluded. The hitherto scarred, embrowned baselines were once again verdant and lush. After barely an hour of Berdych skidding and sprawling all over them, they looked ploughed once more. Of course, the early rounds of Wimbledon are always quite slippery, but this seemed worse. The surface was disintegrating before our eyes.

It partially explains how Berdych lost to Steve Darcis in straight sets, although for the full explanation one shouldn't ignore the quality of play, which from the Belgian was very high, and highly astute. Berdych did fall over a lot, but Darcis was adept at facilitating this, endlessly varying his pace, direction and length, constantly slicing low to the Czech, and giving Berdych little to swing at. It worked beautifully. Tellingly, Darcis struck over twice as many winners as his opponent (27 to 13 in two sets). He was helped by some surprisingly non-penetrative serving from Berdych, which is an issue on grass when you're 6'5". Penetrating is something you'd prefer your serve to do, all else being equal.

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

This was later an issue for Roger Federer, whose first delivery had proved so integral to his Wimbledon triumph earlier in the month. Today he faced Alejandro Falla, who was in rare form on return. For some reason the sight of Federer across the net sometimes

¹¹ Editorial indignation reached typically comical levels the following morning, inspiring Harrison to front up on NBC and offer a full and unreserved apology for his behaviour. There was, sadly, no apology forthcoming for the mole people, which left the whole thing sounding a little hollow.

transfigures the Columbian from a merely capable grass court player into an inspired one. Much reference has of course been made to this pair's first round match at Wimbledon a few years ago, in which Falla led Federer by a couple of sets to none, and later served for the match. Few mention their match from two weeks before that, when Federer had thrashed him on the way to the Halle final. Initially, today's encounter seemed closer to that one.

Falla was playing well, but Federer was too. The Swiss took the first set 6/3. He broke and moved ahead 5/3 in the second. Falla slumped to 0-40 on his next service game. Three match points. Easy enough: perfunctory, even. Falla saved them all, without doing anything truly spectacular, although he seems to have a delightful gift for wrong-footing the world No.1. The Columbian doesn't hit the ball especially hard, but he has a solid, low base, sturdy pins, and he can drive through the ball in such a way that it shoots through the grass. Federer was often caught out. Nevertheless, the top seed stepped up to serve for the match, but was broken when a forehand winner was deemed to have missed the court, thereby debarring it from authentic winner status. Federer found another three consecutive breakpoints on Falla's next service game, but again couldn't take any of them. Then he was broken again to lose the set.

Social media erupted with puns. Suddenly the Columbian was 'on Falla', and tireless variations thereof. Some, adopting a more prosaic approach to pronunciation, remarked that 'this Falla can really play.' The real shame is that Federer's name doesn't lend itself so well to this type of virtuoso wordplay, thus forestalling the sadly unforgettable malarkey that followed Mardy Fish's loss to Falla back in Melbourne. Federer broke to open the deciding set – remember it's best-of-three, which is some kind of code for 'anything-can-happen' – but it didn't take. Falla, who was still on himself, broke back. Then he wasn't. A range of errors, some quite inventive and almost all of them Columbian, saw Federer break again, then hold, and then move once more to three match points. He took it, finally. It was a tremendous fight from Falla, and a legitimate scare for Federer, who'll next face Julien Benneteau.

In other news, Robin Haase has defended his maiden title in Kitzbühel, defeating Philipp Kohlschreiber in the final. Both are due to play on grass in London tomorrow, although the German has since withdrawn with an adductor strain. He has entered the top twenty for the first time in his career, but he won't be representing his country at the Olympic Games. Cold comfort, especially considering his generous draw, and that anything can happen in a best-of-three match on grass. All around, a shame.

A Gibbering Wreck

Olympic Games, Day Three

My patriotic commitment to follow the planet's least understated sporting festival in real time was always going to result in total exhaustion eventually, given the cruel decision to stage it ten time zones in the past. I'd known I was due to collapse at some point, but had nonetheless felt confident that more than three days would pass before I was reduced to a yawning and gibbering wreck. I was wrong. This morning I stirred from a pitifully abbreviated slumber to the news that my compatriot William Henzell had been narrowly defeated in the third round of the men's table tennis by the giant Belarusian Vladimir Samsonov. My eyes rapidly misted over at this discovery, as they had twenty-four hours earlier when my television first informed me that Henzell had reached the third round. I'd never heard of Henzell before, and immediately forgot his name. It was enough to know he was doing it for Australia, or 'Straya as it is known locally. At sufficient intensities, the Olympic spirit is indistinguishable from exhaustion.

(For the record, Samsonov later gave a great account of himself in going down to the prodigious and top-seeded Jike Zhang. Other table tennis players you may have heard of include the veteran Zoran Primorac, who has played in every Olympic table tennis event since 1988 – the year Zhang was *born* – and Timo Boll, who was upset today.)

The irony, if we can even call it that, was that I'd been determined to have an early night. The fault mainly lies with Victoria Azarenka, who tarried far too long in seeing off Irina-Camelia Begu, fatally delaying Julien Benneteau's arrival on Centre Court. The Frenchman was due to face Roger Federer, whose vast fan-base now included a marginal but vocal doomsday sect devoted entirely to the belief that Benneteau would finish the job he'd started at Wimbledon some weeks ago. Back then he'd led Federer by two sets to love, and several times hove to within a couple of points of the match. Alejandro Falla had already demonstrated that Federer's draw wasn't merely easy. It was *too* easy.

As it happened, it was *all* too easy for Federer, who permitted Benneteau just four games in a touch under an hour, and faced no breakpoints. To be fair, Benneteau was far from his best, whereas he'd been close to it during The Championships. He looked physically inhibited throughout the second set, which from memory lasted less time than Azarenka earlier took to enquire loudly and querulously whether the umpire was conversant with all the rules. Federer had no compunction about exploiting Benneteau's injury, throwing in drop shots off returns, stretching him wide with serves, and forcing him to get out of his own way with hard groundstrokes at the body. Federer next faces

Denis Istomin. Surprises happen, and the top seed may well lose, but I can't see it meriting the formation of another cult.

A glance up from my monitor revealed Channel Nine entering its third straight hour of women's synchronised diving, a stately event that boasts undeniable allure, although even this had worn thin some time earlier. I almost longed for them to cut back to the equestrian cross country, until they actually did, and I was reminded how stressful it is to watch large animals make constant leaps of faith over topiary. Earlier, during the first hour of synchronised diving, I'd watched Andy Roddick deliver a masterclass in how to blow breakpoints, especially during the second set, when he went a heroic one from nine. Luckily his own serve was unassailable, and well beyond anything Martin Klizan's adventures in Kitzbühel last week prepared him for. The Slovakian won 17% of his receiving points, and did not gain a break point. Roddick will next face Novak Djokovic, and therefore won't enjoy the same advantage. Serves will come back, and flabbily-wafted groundstrokes will be dealt with. Brad Gilbert has predicted an upset. That is either the Olympic spirit talking, or a bad night's sleep.

The longest break from the diving – one of the Australians was called Sharleen, since 'Charlene' is presumably too exotic for suburban 'Strayans – came as Lleyton (Layt'n) Hewitt beat Sergiy Stakhovsky in three high quality and highly aggressive sets. Hewitt was magnificent through the early going, although the Ukrainian lifted and broke late to grab the second set. Hewitt returned the favour in the third, and as victory darted eagerly into view, Our Lleyton grew so overcome that he began to supplement his 'come-ons' with the odd '*vamos*', which I found a little confusing, if not downright unpatriotic. It didn't seem to hurt, and he served out the match with considerable poise – unreturnable, forehand winner, ace. Greg Norman was watching. That didn't seem to hurt either.

By now it was apparent that synchronised diving is really a species of marathon, which is fitting since it also dates from 490BC. It commemorates the practice whereby Athenian soldiers would leap in graceful tandem from the cliffs of Marathon onto the Persian ships below, a largely symbolic gesture, as the boats sustained little damage. With this connection to antiquity in mind, I grew predictably choked up as Sharleen (nickname: 'Shaz') and partner soared like stones to fifth place. *Vamos*, indeed. It was time for bed.

Believe in the Stars

Olympic Games, Day Four

(2) Djokovic d. Roddick, 6/2 6/1

"'Believe in the stars' . . . It's like that doesn't even mean anything anymore."

The disillusioned words of Kenneth Ellen Parcell rang in my ears as Andy Roddick's celestially spangled footwear trudged resignedly towards the net. Galactically-themed sneakers had not been sufficient to lighten an earthbound game, nor to extend a painfully one-sided contest: Novak Djokovic won his 53rd and final point in the 54th and final minute of the match. Certain American commentators, believing perhaps a little too fervently in their faded stars, had earlier dubbed this a 'popcorn match'. If they didn't share my low opinion of popcorn before, one assumes they do now.

It is undeniable that Roddick no longer operates at the level he once did, but even in his largely forgotten prime he never attained the stratospheric plane upon which Djokovic today manoeuvred. At his reckless and callow best, the American might have snared a few more games, but that would have been all. Djokovic was quite incredible. He punished anything loose, as we'd known he would. But the Serb was equally as merciless in dealing with first serves – Roddick landed just 60%, which is modest by his standards, and only won 54% of those – and devastating whenever he himself was permitted to initiate the point. Djokovic served 14 aces to Roddick's five, struck 34 winners to six unforced errors, and achieved a perfect 4/4 on breakpoints. It hardly gets better than that. And if it does get better, awkward questions are inevitably asked.

Elsewhere in London a Chinese teenager named Shiwen Ye found this out, or has been found out, depend on which school of thought you're enrolled at. She was obliged to face up to a spikily-armoured and steadily-advancing media phalanx, and explain how she had contrived to swim the second fastest lap of a 400IM ever, faster even than Ryan Lochte had earlier managed in taking out the men's gold medal. She was usefully reminded that this is first time in Olympic history that a woman has swum faster in any lap than a male gold medallist, and quickly disabused of the notion that this is an achievement to take pride in. The implication, lest you missed it, is that she's doped to the gills. Most of the questions put to her assumed this at some level, especially the ones that flat out asked it. 'How do you respond to allegations that you're using banned substances?' – an accusation artlessly suffixed by a question mark, a standard practice in this field. She maintained her composure, and her innocence. She is only sixteen. At some level innocence is all she has.

On Australian television, Grant Hackett rose heroically to the challenge of not rising to the bait repeatedly proffered by Channel Nine, no matter how enticingly they dangled it. He refused to agree that Shiwen Ye was doping, and instead contended that some athletes just really come on at that age. Other pundits proved less circumspect, and less restrained in their condemnation. There are therefore two schools of thought colliding here, one suggesting that there's a first time for everything, the other insisting that no, there isn't. But two schools is nothing. Mao Zedong once grandly decreed 'let a hundred schools of thought contend', as a prelude to executing everyone caught subscribing to the ninety-nine incorrect ones. Hopefully a kinder fate awaits Shiwen Ye if she's guilty, and caught.

(3) Murray d. Nieminen, 6/2 6/4

Jarkko Nieminen was probably fortunate to escape similar scrutiny about his second serve. Never before has a male player deployed a serve that is categorically worse than all of the women's serves at an Olympic Games, even the women contesting beach volleyball. It seems a clear cut case of performance diminishing drugs at work, although to what end I cannot say. It certainly had Murray stumped. The Scot is among the best returners of difficult serves in the sport – he is notoriously hard to ace – but with the degree of difficulty dialled so low, it took him a while to figure out what to do. Merely getting the serve back – the very essence of 'returning' – was not the problem. He blasted returns out, and bunted them back short. Some of Nieminen's serves were so slow that Murray was compelled to lunge for them, and took to standing almost on the service line.

Fortunately Murray was superior in every other aspect of the game, with the possible exception of left-handedness. Had Djokovic not eclipsed it immediately afterwards, the Brit's comprehensive victory would have been considered the premiere shellacking of the day, which is an important accolade I just invented. Still, it was good enough for the locals, thickening the close air of the closed Centre Court with a fearsome din. It was also good enough for Andrew Castle and Tim Henman, commentating on the BBC. No one does smugness quite like the English when Murray is in the process of dismantling an opponent. The tone very quickly grows magnanimous, as they airily dole out advice to Murray's hapless victim, in order that the poor foreigner might perhaps cushion their buttocks against the full force of Murray's boot.

(WC) Hewitt d. (13) Cilic, 6/4 7/5

Of course, Australian commentators are no slouches when it comes to smugness, even though they've had considerably fewer opportunities to stay in practice lately. Sadly

none of Hewitt's compatriots were available to call his quite stirring win over Marin Cilic, although the leathery British voice supplied by the BBC sounded sufficiently impressed. The wearying tale of Hewitt's long twilight has been that the spirit remains indomitable even as the flesh endlessly submits to the surgeon's knife. It was a rare experience today to see Hewitt unimpeded by anything but age, with the result that he was still far too quick for an audibly disgruntled Cilic. Hewitt's spryness saw him break late in the first set, and earn a number of break points through the second. His other primary weapons included a willingness to target the Croatian's forehand with flat drives, and his brain with lucky overrules. Thus pressed, Cilic's forehand and brain duly disintegrated.

Afterward Hewitt surprised us all by failing to announce he will undergo surgery next week, and as a consequence might not miss the remainder of the season. Surprise turned to bewilderment when he insisted he actually felt quite good, and that it was a rare treat to feel so little pain. This was dangerous talk. Bewilderment became consternation when we realised he next faces Djokovic, although Hewitt himself appeared typically upbeat at the prospect. Now we 'Strayans don't know what to expect. Dare we hope? Will Our Lleyton do it for us? Will it be a popcorn match? One thing is for sure: anything is possible, if you just believe in the stars. Or else.

Fancy Chances

Olympic Games, Day Six

The four semifinalists of the Olympic tennis event have been decided, following a day of men's quarterfinals almost entirely devoid of drama. None of the four matches extended into a third hour, or a deciding set, and only two of those sets reached tiebreaks. The four semifinalists are Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray, and Juan Martin del Potro. If doubts linger over the validity of tennis as an Olympic event, this line-up has hopefully helps to allay them. Or perhaps it's fairer to assert the obverse, that the Olympics works well as a tennis tournament. So far the Olympic tennis event has looked and felt rather like a Masters event, which is gratifying for those of us who fervently believe one of those should be played on grass.

Three of these men will leave London with a satisfyingly dense alloy medallion (mostly silver, some copper), and one of them won't. Given the surface (green) and the company (red, white and blue), it is difficult to imagine that del Potro will number among those eventually mounting the medal podium, although I assume he has the means to install a private one at his house for re-enactment purposes, although that might be a little weird, especially for house-guests. He plays Federer in the first of tomorrow's

semifinals. This will be their second meeting on grass. One must fancy Federer's chances, especially since it will be their sixth encounter this year, and the Argentine has yet to win one. Federer has been victorious on slow hardcourts in Melbourne and Indian Wells, faster hardcourts indoors in Rotterdam and outdoors in Dubai, and on clay at Roland Garros. These victories have testified mostly to the world No.1's peerless variety and unwavering determination to force del Potro out of position, detain him there indefinitely, and then subject him to stern questioning. No surface rewards this style more than grass. Expect to see large feet wronged and balls sliced, often low and short to the backhand. Del Potro's best chance, as ever, will be to hit everything very hard.

The other semifinal, between Murray and Djokovic, is tougher to read. Murray has successfully navigated a draw that appeared quite frenzied when it first tore free from its hander's grasp, but has grown decidedly more sedate as it caromed through the London streets. He defeated Nicolas Almagro in today's quarterfinal, a man whose proven inability to perform on either grass or big occasions was exacerbated by a right shoulder reportedly dangling by a sinewy thread. As quarterfinals go, it might have been much worse: Murray might have faced a rested and dangerous Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. This is a sentiment that Djokovic hopefully shared, as he saw off a tired and frustrated Tsonga without too much incident. Both Murray and Djokovic have been inconsistent this week, skittishly veering between majestic calm and wide-eyed panic from round to round, or even set to set, although they've finished well even on the bad days. I will pick Murray to win their semifinal, but I have no good reason to do so, beyond a nebulous sense that home turf will once more prove more helpful than not. Don't make me defend this choice, because I cannot.

Djokovic will beat del Potro for the bronze. Murray will beat Federer for the gold. There you go, British readers. I hope you're happy. Now toddle along! Alright, have the Brits gone? Ok then.

Federer will win.

Doing the Wrong Thing Badly

A Ramble on the Badminton

By now the story is a long day old that eight female badminton players, some of them among the foremost badminton players on Earth, have been disqualified from the London Olympics for not bothering to pretend they care. To the somehow debated issue

of whether they were wrong to have tanked has been added the vexing question of whether their real crime was merely an unwillingness to cover it up.

Their crime, such as it is, is now notorious. In order to achieve optimal quarterfinals against weaker teams, several stronger teams tanked their final round robin matches. Furthermore, they did it in a manner that was obvious even to the thousands of people watching, hardly any of whom were actual badminton fans. The scenes were unquestionably comical. As an already restive crowd went collectively bananas, glassy-eyed athletes flaccidly bunted shuttlecocks into the net, which even I could see was marginally less entertaining than badminton conducted at full throttle. Some have suggested that the glassy-eyed athletes are not to blame, since they were clearly just following team directions. The true culprit, apparently, is the round robin format that not only facilitated this outcome, but somehow encouraged it. The fault for a weakness of character apparently lies with the circumstances that test it.

I am slightly bemused by this line of reasoning, by the contention that the athletes are blameless, even though tight shots of their faces revealed them to be almost idiotically guileless as it transpired. The indelible impression was that none of the eight believed they were doing anything wrong. Why wouldn't you throw an unimportant match in order to elevate your chance of winning an important one later? Following that reasoning, if you are going to throw the match, why not do so quickly? Why waste time and energy? Surely it's all about the medals? And anyway, they were just following team orders.

They've since changed songbooks, and are now singing appropriately contrite tunes. Reigning Olympic champion Yu Yang has allegedly quit the sport in shame, or in protest. But, at the time, as the admittedly threadbare veil of innocence was being peeled away to reveal the dull realpolitik hunched beneath, the faces of the eight girls couldn't have looked more innocently indifferent had they been powerfully drugged, which in a way they were. Such considerations were not sufficient to mollify the crowd, which grew vociferously wrathful as each match spiralled into thudding absurdity, well beyond the normal degree of disgruntlement one might expect from a group of people who hadn't been able to get tickets to anything better than the badminton. Even tickets to the badminton aren't cheap, so it's understandable that one might feel upset when they turn out to be worthless.

I don't imagine anyone holds the IOC up as the nonpareil of virtue, but little is achieved when we blame them for inadvertently providing the context for temptation, rather than those who readily succumb to it. Virtue untested is no virtue at all – by extension the

same holds true for sportsmanship – and as tests go this one was hardly severe. The fact that this particular test found the offending players entirely wanting does not infer that they were therefore operating within a moral crucible. None of these players was forced to choose which of their children would live or die. They just had to try or not.

The round robin format invariably throws up these moments, and athletes with even more at stake than a badminton medal generally make good choices, or at least go to some effort to disguise their bad choices. Tennis fans can think back to the last few matches in the round robin phase of last year's World Tour Finals, which were conducted amidst a cloying miasma of cynicism. Many tennis fans had been sure that Janko Tipsarevic would tank his match against Djokovic, in order to ensure that his friend would progress safely to the semifinals. Instead Tipsarevic fought out a rare win over his higher-ranked compatriot, and ensured that Djokovic's majestic season ended with a rare loss. The next match between David Ferrer and Tomas Berdych was similarly fraught. On the other hand, readers can no doubt come up with examples of matches that *were* tanked, and yet remained entertaining and good-spirited.

For beyond the moral problem of right and wrong lurks the practical one that the badminton players didn't even bother to hide what they were doing. They could have at least tried to make it look convincing, and it's hard to avoid the conclusion that a sufficient effort in this respect would have helped them escape censure. Lack-of-best-effort rules are sadly necessary in most sports, even amateur ones, but most athletes only suffer sanctions when they make little to no effort at all. If nothing else, it was offensive from a strictly technical perspective, especially for a fan of tennis, a sport that boasts some acknowledged masters in this area. Here is Andre Agassi:

But losing a match on purpose isn't easy. It's almost harder than winning. You have to lose in such a way that the crowd can't tell, and in a way that you can't tell – because of course you're not wholly conscious of losing on purpose. You're not even half conscious. Your mind is tanking, but your body is fighting on . . . The deliberately bad decisions are made in a dark place, far below the surface.

By making their deliberately bad decisions consciously under Olympic floodlights, the disgraced badminton players foolishly dispelled any shadow of doubt that might have protected them. They disqualified themselves. One has to imagine that the Badminton World Federation would have grasped at any half-plausible excuse not to suspend them, since doing so hardly does the Games any favours. By putting on a decent show, at least the crowd might have been entertained. Fans will put up with a lot, but they won't put up with the certainty of a fix, especially not one conducted so brazenly and disdainfully.

Think back to May 2002, and the widespread outrage when Rubens Barrichello submitted to team orders to let Michael Schumacher cross first at Spielberg, in order that the German might secure the Drivers' Championship. Everyone who was interested already knew that team orders were a reality, but no one enjoyed seeing that reality writ so large. It was scrawled with a toddler's crayon for all to see when Schumacher graciously handed Barrichello the winner's trophy on the podium, for which Ferrari was fined a million dollars, from memory its only penalty. The lesson was clear: do it, but don't make it so obvious.

Doing the wrong thing is bad enough, but doing the wrong thing badly is worse. And in a marginal sport such as badminton, doing the wrong thing so badly that it tarnishes the brand of the Olympic Games is inexcusable. Disqualification was inevitable.

The Stories We Tell

Olympic Games, Day Seven

(1) Federer d. del Potro, 3/6 7/6 19/17

My long Friday night was already repurposing itself into a never-ending Saturday morning when Roger Federer commenced the rambling sequence of holds that would ensure his ultimate victory over Juan Martin del Potro. Momentarily overcome by the commonplace melancholy of the witching hour, I reflected that while Melbourne isn't exactly on the opposite side of the world from Wimbledon's Centre Court, it isn't far off. The world felt very far away, and a trifle surreal.

On my television a seemingly infinite parade of Australians were almost but not quite winning gold medals across a range of disciplines. Meanwhile on my computer the two men scurrying over the grass were from nations that had yet to win any medals at all. This was worth keeping in mind as the talking heads on the telly grew unhinged by the realisation that we have now fallen behind New Zealand on the medal tally. My Bravo stream relayed the important news that Walmart sells steaks so succulent that even the actors in their ads will eat them. From near and far, I was being bombarded by unreality. I wondered aloud where I might find a Walmart steak at this hour, and in this country. Simultaneously, Federer won and del Potro lost. Switzerland would have a medal, and Argentina might. Federer kissed the flag on his shirt. There's such a thing as a sense of perspective, but at two o'clock in the morning it can be tempting to abandon it. And Murray hadn't even appeared yet.

Appearing serene and solemn even in his consuming disappointment, the idea was seductive that del Potro's gallant defeat might be the making of him, or, more accurately, the remaking. 'Delpo is back!' rang the phantom cry, even as he ambled despondently to the net, bandana swiped askew. That the loss came to Federer was unsurprising. He has been inflicting these on the Argentine all year, and hardly anyone had failed to predict a reoccurrence, myself included. What was surprising, and perhaps redemptive, was its manner. At a shade under four and a half hours it is by some accounts the longest best-of-three match in history, and for a change the loss wasn't inflicted by Federer so much as it was inexorably and gradually handed over. This was probably the match of the year so far. For once we can say there was no shame in losing, and entirely mean it.

But if there was no shame, nor was there much joy. It is probably little more than a curious statistic that del Potro had only ever defeated Federer while the latter was ranked No.1, and that the last nine defeats occurred when the Swiss ranked at No.2 or lower. (The last time Federer defeated del Potro as a No.1 was in Basel in 2007, when the latter was still a teenager, and the former remained somewhere nearer the apogee of his career's immense arc.¹²) It is the kind of random pattern that seems decidedly less random if it continues. For a long time today it seemed like it *would* continue, as del Potro survived an early break point and set about harrying and serving the top seed around and off Centre Court. He was flogging the ball about as hard as he ever does, which is to say terrifically hard, and yet committing almost no errors. It was a terrifying display, which only really faltered in the second set tiebreaker, and even then only temporarily.

For me the mightiest part of del Potro's performance today was the authority with which he commenced the third set, thereby establishing the tone he would sustain throughout its heaving and ridiculous entirety. He had lost the second set despite being the superior player for most of it. This has too often inspired del Potro to a precipitous mental collapse, as disappointment at the missed opportunity dissolved the decision-making parts of his brain to a bitter mush. Losing the tiebreak was del Potro's cue to lose the match, but he didn't, for a while, and when he eventually did it wasn't because of that. He fought on, for hours, and it is the quality of this fight and the intensity of his desire and application, even as his footwork grew ponderous and his opponent's serve indecipherable, that ultimately elevated this match into greatness. It is these qualities that led us to wonder, even as his tears welled and spilled, whether del Potro was indeed

¹² They also played in Madrid in 2008, but this was back when it was played indoors in the autumn – unlike now, when it is played outdoors in a shitstorm – and therefore after Federer had lost his top ranking to Rafael Nadal.

back. Time will tell, once the raw sense that losing feels worse than winning fades, if this is the story to tell, whether this unmaking will really see him remade. Perhaps that's just a nice story, and the tears tell the real tale.

(3) Murray d. (2) Djokovic 7/5 7/5

The story for Novak Djokovic, inescapable for now, is that he is a hostage to last year's success. In 2011 he almost won everything, at least until the US Open was done with. The idea that he'd win everything again this year was patently ludicrous, but only if we relied upon the past as a guide to what is possible. However, when someone goes on an unprecedented run such as his, precedent feels irrelevant, as the records tumble week by week. By the French Open we had already progressed from wondering how Djokovic could keep on winning to wondering how he might possibly lose. He seemed somehow to exist outside of history.

As this year got under way we asked, with only a sideways glance at rationality, whether Djokovic repeating his success felt so oddly possible *because* it was absurd. He had made the absurd his business. He promptly made it his home by winning the most absurd of Australian Open finals. Nevertheless, in an effort to temper the more fanciful flights of expectation, he announced modest goals for his season. He didn't believe he'd win everything again; he just wanted to win the few things he'd missed the first time round, such as the French Open, which he'd missed out on because of Federer, and Olympic gold, which had proved terribly difficult to win in a non-Olympic year. These were his goals for 2012.

By losing to Andy Murray in the second of the Olympic semifinals today, Djokovic has ensured he will win neither a gold medal nor a French Open this year. By the standards of last year, these results amount to a catastrophic failure, which merely proves that judging him by last year's standards is cruel and unfair. As Federer noted in his years of dominance, success on that scale grows into a kind of monster with a life of its own, whose only faculty is hunger, since to demonstrate you can do something once is taken as evidence that you should be able to keep on doing it indefinitely, and should want to. The outrageous becomes quotidian, and therefore expected. But the story of Djokovic is the salutary message that even the greatest of us remain human, and that everyone is only mighty for a time. The message isn't for Djokovic, since he already knows it. He knows, from hour to hour and week to week, precisely how mortal he feels. The message is for the rest of us, who hoped or feared that he would continue winning forever. He might have, but it was absurd to expect it, even from the man who'd made absurdity his business.

I am courting the obvious by saying that Djokovic still wins plenty, and that he wasn't terribly far from winning today against an inspired Andy Murray. Much like del Potro had been earlier, Djokovic was arguably the better player through the second set, and could therefore feel similarly aggrieved when he lost it. Indeed, his second set yielded even more moments in which to idly indulge in games of what-might-have-been. (The missed breakpoint at 5/5 will surely haunt his fans for some time.) Sadly, unlike del Potro, Djokovic had also lost the first set, and was therefore not permitted to continue, even if he'd wanted to. But it's doubtful whether he did want to. That last error-laced game looked suspiciously like capitulation, especially the final suicidal serve-volley. Can we begrudge him that?

Like del Potro, Djokovic was defeated by an exceptional player in an exceptional Olympic semifinal. For the Argentine, it gave us cause to wonder at the good things this might betoken in his future. For the Serb, it gave us an excuse to lament the past. These are the stories we tell. Being stories, they are, of course, wrong. Djokovic and del Potro will play for the bronze medal on Sunday.

Twenty-Eight Days Later

Olympic Games, Gold Medal Match

(3) Murray d. (1) Federer, 6/2 6/1 6/4

As Andy Murray's fifth and final ace punched vigorously into Centre Court's temporarily hideous back hoarding, and the fact that he'd now won the Olympic gold medal commenced the slow process of sinking all the way in, he provided a preview of how he'll react when he one day wins a Slam. It turns out Murray is not the type to collapse on his back, or dissolve into wet-cheeked rapture, as Juan Martin del Potro had a short time earlier, or as Roger Federer does all the time. He dropped his racquet, and dropped to his haunches, a study in disbelief, then jogged to the net, where the words exchanged with his defeated opponent finally inspired a small grin. As a comparison to winning a major, this is about all today's victory could tell us. If only that was enough. It is an Olympic gold medal. *Of course it's enough.*

Really, the question of whether Olympic gold might usefully be compared to a Grand Slam trophy was a pretty fatuous one to begin with, and hardly grew less so as knowing pundits persisted in repeating it as the event wore on. John McEnroe believes the Olympics should award the same points as a Major. Others feel it should reward none. I think McEnroe is overstating it, but mostly I don't care. The pointlessness of these musings reached its highest and lowest point when NBC put the question to Murray

immediately following his majestic victory: 'How does this compare to winning a Grand Slam?' It wasn't the very first question he was asked, but it was near enough to make at least one viewer squirm. Murray neatly sidestepped the issue by making the obvious point that he has no way of knowing how winning a Major feels.

But he does know how winning a gold medal feels, and, even better, he knows how it feels to win one on Wimbledon's Centre Court before thousands of hysterical compatriots, having thrashed the world No.1 who you'd painfully lost to just four weeks before. Indeed, he is now the world's leading authority on this subject, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. He made it perfectly clear it felt fantastic. Asked later by Sue Barker where it rates in the scheme of his victories, Murray replied without hesitation that it was number one, the biggest win of his life. Some have already pencilled him in as favourite for the US Open. They just can't help themselves.

Despite all Roger Federer's talk of sticking around until the Rio Olympics in 2016, he will probably never quite know how winning a gold medal feels, although he must have imagined it any number of times, and Murray will probably permit him a fondle if he asks nicely. Olympic gold will no doubt always remain a gap in the sport's fattest resume, and again it's worth pointing out that this is a gap that even 17 Majors cannot fill. Federer never craved an Olympic gold because it's like a Major. He craved one because it isn't. It's an Olympic gold medal, and, amazingly, he believes it's possible for a high-profile global sport to have more than one type of accolade, and that they don't have to be ranked against each other.

Murray's performance today was particularly gratifying for long-time followers of the sport, and of Murray in particular. There's a piquant satisfaction when a player starts playing the way you always believed he should, and almost immediately meets with success. You can almost delude yourself that you had something to do with it. Murray had been assertive in this semifinal against Novak Djokovic, and he sustained that today. Some have suggested that the key moment came in the third game of the second set, at 2/0 in Murray's favour, when Federer had six break points, but ultimately converted none. I'm not sure that's true. Murray was already up a break, and it is unlikely that being broken back at that moment would have retarded his considerable momentum more than temporarily. He'd already blasted open the floodgates about 45 minutes earlier, and halting the flood would have taken far more effort, enterprise and engineering skill than even Federer could give today. He didn't break, and the flood continued to gush through.

The key moment really came in the opening game of the match, when Murray fell to 15-40 on serve. For the briefest of moments a different match seemed likely. But Federer, tense, played both break points gingerly, with a delicate and unnecessary caution. Murray had commenced nervously, but Federer was too nervous to see it, and upon holding the Scot's nerves were steeled. From 2/2 in the first set he grew terribly calm and narrowly focussed, perfectly combining pace, depth and a bold determination to play for the lines. Federer wouldn't hold serve again for an hour, and quite often he would be broken after holding game points. Even with early breaks in hand, Murray was relentless, and tireless.

Federer, it must be said, wasn't tireless. The extent to which Friday's savage semifinal with del Potro inhibited the world No.1's performance has seen sufficient debate. It is hard to see how it could not have affected him, although when interviewed afterwards he was keen to suggest that his fatigue was more mental than physical, and that he'd mainly made too many bad decisions. That's certainly how it seemed from where I was sitting. Federer was too slow in realising that Murray wasn't going to start missing, too willing to cede control of baseline exchanges, and too careful when he needed to be reckless, especially on break points and game points. If he was tired, he needed to be more aggressive. But then again, one wonders if such reflections are a waste of time, since, above all, Federer was simply outplayed. He said that, too, with typical grace, and you could tell he really believed it. The last set looks superficially the closest, if we simply go by the score, but it wasn't. Federer won one point on Murray's serve, and that came in the final game. Indeed, although he had nine break points throughout the entire match, and converted none, they all came in only three different service games. Meanwhile Federer won just seven games, all on his own serve, and he was compelled to fight for most of those.

Afterwards Federer made precisely the right noises about his satisfaction at winning the silver, but I don't think he was quite at the stage where such noises ring entirely true, even or especially to himself. But they will, in time. Del Potro had earlier proved amply and beautifully that there is no such thing as an Olympic medal to feel embarrassed by. Two days ago the Argentine repeatedly came within two points of playing off for a gold or silver, yet his elation at winning bronze over Djokovic today was so unfettered and genuine that it induced one's heart to sing. Without question the best moments from these Games have been provided by those athletes utterly and delightedly overcome at achieving a minor placing. The worst moments have been provided by those who've failed to reign in their shame at missing gold. Australia's continuing run of silver medals has provided me with ample opportunities to witness both. It also means I'm justified in

extending an offer of honorary citizenship to Federer. He'll fit right in. Then again, I doubt the Swiss will give him up without a struggle, since this silver is their second medal of the games. Meanwhile del Potro's medal was Argentina's first. These achievements mean a lot.

Murray's achievement of course means even more, for all that his gold medal is part of a rapidly mounting tally for the host nation. If Federer's stalled narrative was of the perfect summer achieving perfect fulfilment, Murray's was of redemption for the disasters of the past. He came back and won Wimbledon just four weeks after losing it, against the same opponent. He could stand in the same spot where he'd fallen to lonely pieces twenty-eight days earlier, and this time smile with the whole of Britain, and know that he'd won. It may not be a Major, but it never had to be. It is the biggest win of his life.

The US Summer

Strange Things Happen

Toronto Masters, Day Five

As the Olympic Games pressed indefatigably onward – artistic gymnasts, it turns out, are both terrifying and immune to fatigue – the prevailing sentiment directed towards this year's edition of the Canadian Masters was one of profound pity. Through no fault of its own, Toronto's starting list had thinned worryingly by the hour. Already lean when Roger Federer and Juan Martin del Potro commenced the fifth hour of their superb semifinal, its ribs were showing by the time Usain Bolt got busy with the Swedish handballers. It had to be hospitalised while the rhythmic gymnasts inflated their shiny balls, smeared on their make-up and carefully selected the least appropriate music available. No Federer, no Nadal, no Ferrer. Djokovic, Murray and del Potro were almost certain non-starters. Tsonga was doubtful. Once again the Olympics had ruined the US Summer Series. For those who believe the Masters 1000 events should showcase the best the sport has to offer, it was all pretty sad.

In a sense, our concerns for poor Toronto were justified. Strange things tend to happen when neither Federer nor Nadal show up. From memory this hasn't happened since 2006, when Nikolay Davydenko thrashed surprise finalist Dominic Hrbaty in Bercy, 6/1 6/2 6/2. I presume this blowout merely confirmed the ATP in its decision to do away with best-of-five championship deciders, a decision that had been necessitated some months earlier, when Nadal and Federer missed Hamburg, having nearly crippled each other in Rome's final the week before. Tommy Robredo subsequently won in Germany. While this did not go against the strict letter of the rules, the governing body felt that it amply violated the spirit of them, and took steps to ensure it would never happen again. Best-of-five finals, which once provided a fitting and, dare I say, Olympian conclusion to the Masters Series events, were done for. The lesson seems clear: Federer and Nadal not turning up breaks the sport. It's already broken the weather. Today was a washout.

Initially, however, Toronto felt uncannily like business as usual. The sun shone, the hardcourts were slow, and the crowds were sparse, although the locals made some effort for Milos Raonic, even when he didn't play on the evocatively rechristened Milos Raonic Grandstand. Donald Young continues to pursue Vince Spadea's record for consecutive tour losses, proving that no goal is unobtainable, if you only lack belief. Alex Dolgopolov persists in frustrating hopes that he might attain any measure of consistency. He won Washington last week, his biggest title to date, although it admittedly wasn't the

strongest field the tournament has ever produced, owing partly to London, and partly to the event itself, which is not what it once was. The Ukrainian then lost his first match in Toronto, to Radek Stepanek, who then beat an exhaustedly bronze-medallioned del Potro. The Argentine had exceeded expectations just by turning up, but then lived down to them by losing easily. Perhaps it's not all business as usual. Tsonga showed up, too, but only for as long as it took to lose to Jeremy Chardy.

On the other hand Tommy Haas continues to provide hope for those of us in our mid-thirties that a career as a professional tennis player remains within reach. The self-consuming rage that defined the German's early years has been honed and redirected into a heroic defiance of time itself. He reached the final in Washington last week, and has sustained this form in Toronto, beating David Nalbandian and Gilles Simon in his first couple of matches. The match against Nalbandian was particularly fine, as Haas blew four match points in the second set tiebreaker, only to recover in the third. In his prime he would have fallen catastrophically apart at this point, and taken to verbally scourging his coach (Red Ayme used to weather a fearsome barrage). But the new Haas, who is ironically the old Haas, didn't indulge himself thus. He won instead. He is now ranked No.25, having risen 180 places since the beginning of the season, and will be seeded for the US Open. On current form he'll be seeded measurably higher than No.25 (indeed, he has already moved up a spot based on this week's efforts). He'll next face Stepanek, who looks every minute of his thirty-four years, and then some. Indeed, it's rather as though Haas has done a Dorian Gray-like deal with the devil, and Stepanek is his secret portrait in the attic.

Contrary to expectations, both Murray and Djokovic turned up, and both turned up to play, at least for a bit. Murray saw off Flavio Cipolla, thus earning the gratitude of the tournament organisers, a sentiment they expressed with a chocolate cake, which I take to be a Canadian tradition. Murray repaid this kindness by withdrawing from his next match against Raonic, which didn't appear to faze the locals at all. The Scot cited a left knee injury. I can only assume it was his own left knee, given how persistently he grabbed at it throughout his opening match. It was almost reassuring. Much like the Sampras serve or Usain Bolt's thunderbolt thing, Murray's patented leg-clutch has become so immediately recognisable that its silhouette can be trademarked and used for branding purposes.

Djokovic meanwhile opened against Bernard Tomic, and beat him without any trouble whatsoever. Djokovic is the defending champion, and has a ton of points to defend in the next five weeks, with a ton being defined as 3,600. Defending them all will be an enormous task for the Serb, but necessary if he wants to remain within sight of the No.1

ranking, currently held by Federer. With Murray's withdrawal Djokovic is now the outright favourite for the title, if he wasn't already. It is entirely possible that his sternest test before the final will come against Haas. In the final he may face Tomas Berdych, who managed to win his opener despite dropping a seventh consecutive tiebreak (a record even Young might be proud of, if only more of Young's sets ever reached six-all). Or he might not.

Indeed, given Federer and Nadal's absence, something entirely different might happen. The Super Wildcard rule is a barely understood and rarely invoked provision in professional tennis. It allows a tournament to insert any player into any part of the draw entirely at whim, with or without that player's consent. This decision can only be overturned by a majority vote within the UN Security Council, and China and Russia have traditionally proved recalcitrant in such matters. If Raonic loses his next match, expect the Toronto Masters organisers, driven over the edge by patriotic anguish, endless withdrawals and a relentless downpour, to invoke the Super Wildcard. Djokovic will therefore fall to Robredo in the semifinals, and Berdych will fall to Hrbaty. From there it's anyone's game.

Three Minute Songs About Girls

Toronto, Semifinal

(14) Gasquet d. (8) Isner, 7/6 6/3

By defeating John Isner in straight sets in today's Toronto semifinal, Richard Gasquet has reached his first Masters 1000 final in six years. As ever, a long gap affords us a long view, and an opportunity to reflect on how much has changed over that time, and to marvel at how little hasn't. The last time Gasquet made it to a Masters final Roger Federer was the world No.1. Think about that.

I will leave to others the broad question of whether the world is a better or worse place than it was six years ago. This being the internet, I imagine a hastily wrought opinion on the matter won't be hard to come by, although the opinion itself will depend on the particular rock you overturn. The Athenian shopkeeper labouring under austerity measures undoubtedly believes that our best days are behind us, but then so does the knuckle-dragging militiaman camped out in the forests of Oregon, incensed at his president's determination to provide healthcare to those who presume to need it. Investment bankers must look back fondly at those heady days when their seven figure bonuses weren't scrutinised before being handed over anyway. On the other hand, Justin Bieber's innumerable fans may well insist that life has never been better: their idol

maintained a relatively subterranean profile in 2006, and generating useful content across his various fan-sites had been a daunting task before he revolutionised music by singing three minute songs about girls.

In August 2006 Gasquet was only twenty-years-old, and still on the make. He had ambled into public consciousness the year before when, as an eighteen-year-old, he beat Federer in Monte Carlo, before going down fighting to Rafael Nadal in the semifinals. He followed that up by making the Hamburg final the following month, where he lost to Federer. Although he was young, it's important to remember that back then eighteen wasn't considered quite so embryonic as it is these days, when we're obliged to regard 23-year-olds as up-and-coming, even as they struggle to survive qualifying. Indeed, by the time Gasquet reached the final of the Canadian Open in 2006, and again lost to Federer, the prevailing sentiment was that his pre-ordained ascent to the top of the sport was taking rather a while. A year later he made it to the semifinals of Wimbledon, and finished 2007 ranked No.7. This was taken to be another very gradual step in the right direction. We realised the sky was the limit, but could he please get a move on?

Justin Bieber had well and truly arrived by March 2009, and the world we'd known and cherished had vanished. People with no credit rating and no assets beyond a pickup truck were suddenly finding it hard obtain mortgages, while those who'd gotten in earlier discovered their mortgages to be 'sub-prime', and that their houses now belonged to the bank. Gasquet, likely driven wild by Bieber's lascivious exhortations, kissed a woman on the lips in a Miami nightclub, and was later interested to learn that her lips had been spiked with cocaine. That was his story. His subsequent ban didn't help his career, but really he'd been on the slide for some time already. He'd exited the top ten almost a year before that, and hasn't been back since. His career was already becoming sub-prime.

The five years since Wimbledon 2007 have mostly witnessed a gradually downward revision in our expectations for Gasquet. Now 26, he has finally shed the Baby Federer tag (although it's probably fairer to say that it was forcibly taken from him and grandly bestowed upon Grigor Dimitrov, with predictably crippling results). It takes a special calibre of talent whereby you can still be dubbed talented after so long on the tour, just as it requires that the talent has mostly gone unrealised. Realising your talents tends to make you accomplished, and Gasquet is hardly that. The question rages in France over who is the most talented out of Gasquet, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Gael Monfils, and whose perennial underperformance has therefore let the nation down the most. It's probably a question of taste, but I don't think I'm courting controversy by saying that Gasquet has *achieved* the least. The reasons why this is so have seen ample discussion, with the

main culprits being his weirdly-gripped forehand, his wavering commitment, his fitness, his remote court-positioning, and his patchy application in big matches. It's quite a lot to have working against you, even with all the talent in the world, and the world's prettiest backhand. On balance, a ranking perpetually in the teens feels about right.

Gasquet spent the last two rain-marred days in Toronto overcoming these hitherto unmanageable issues, or at least proving that a sufficiently lethal backhand really can render them irrelevant for a time. In a touch over twenty-four hours he saw off three current or recent top tenners in Tomas Berdych, Mardy Fish and John Isner. By the end of his quarterfinal against a waning Fish he'd entered that ridiculous mode in which he cannot possibly miss the court, the mode that used to help make the Federer comparisons feel a little less laboured. He didn't quite attain that level in today's semifinal – Isner's arrhythmically lurching game hardly allows it – although he was very good, and served superbly. He survived the match without facing a break point, although this was also a testament to Isner's returning which, to put it mildly, needs work. For all that verse epics are composed in praise of Gasquet's backhand, the true barometer of his form has always been the forehand. At his worst he appears incapable of regulating its depth, which dovetails perfectly with his hopelessly deep positioning to yield all initiative to his opponent. At its best, however, the forehand grows fearsome, and permits audacious winners to be struck from anywhere in the court, or, more commonly, from anywhere behind it.

It would be wilful to pretend Gasquet hasn't benefited from a decidedly generous Toronto draw, one that never included Federer or Nadal, and from which Andy Murray excused himself early on. But this isn't to say he hasn't earned his spot in the final, since all the guys who were left wanted to win it as well, and it has been long years since Gasquet was prominent among them. In the final he will discover the bankably prominent Novak Djokovic, who is also the world No.2 and the defending champion. Gasquet can take some measure of comfort in this, despite a fairly hopeless record against the Serb, and despite in the dire predictions of the bookmakers. While in two previous attempts Gasquet has never won a Masters Series final, he has never lost at that stage to anyone besides Federer. The lesson seems clear. Gasquet just needs to believe. After all:

*Everything starts from something,
But something would be nothing;
Nothing if your heart didn't dream with me.
Where would I be, if you didn't believe?*

Warm, Generous, Beset and Dangerous

Toronto Masters 1000, Final

(1) Djokovic d. (14) Gasquet, 6/3 6/2

Novak Djokovic tonight defeated Richard Gasquet in the final of the Toronto Masters 1000. He did so in two very straight sets, and barely tarried beyond an hour, thereby mounting a persuasive argument both for and against best-of-five set Masters finals. On the one hand, the Canadian crowd has endured a lot this week, and frankly deserved a little more entertainment. On the other hand, just how entertained were they? Did anyone really need to see another set of that? From 3/3 in the first set Djokovic won nine games to Gasquet's two, and there was no good reason to believe the defending champion couldn't sustain this level of domination indefinitely. Undoubtedly Djokovic's ardent admirers could have watched all night, although for two of the littlest fans, swaddled in Serbian bunting and ensconced rapturously in the front row, the real highlight came after the match, when their hero strolled over and gifted them a pair of his racquets, a typically warm and generous gesture.

Even as the week progressed, and Djokovic's triumph grew even less unlikely, some sought to downplay his achievement in Toronto, crowing endlessly about the absence of Nadal and Federer, and Murray's early withdrawal. In rebuttal I suppose one can only point out that Djokovic won Montreal last year when the other three turned up to play, but lost early. These things happen, and fans of other players would do well to remember that some of *their* hero's victories were about as taxing as a daytrip to the seaside, and not, as they may righteously believe, a slog along Omaha Beach. Nadal and Federer have amassed 41 Masters titles between them, and some of those were gathered with seemingly little effort. When you're good enough, that can happen. The idea that some victories should have asterisks attached to them is a bad one that has lately crept into the sport, and ought to creep out again. A win is a win.

In any case, by defending his Canadian Masters title, Djokovic moves ahead of Pete Sampras into outright fourth on the all-time Masters Series leader board, behind only Rafael Nadal (21), Roger Federer (20) and Andre Agassi (17). This also means that Toronto becomes the 15th consecutive Masters event to be claimed by Djokovic, Federer, Nadal or Andy Murray, or the 18th of the last 19. It is at least a partial rebuttal to those who dismiss the concept of a Big Four out of hand, an opinion that relies heavily upon the idea that the Majors are all that matters in tennis, thereby disqualifying Murray from membership among the elite. The Scot's compelling gold medal performance at the

London Olympics further complicates the matter. Then again, Federer, Nadal and Djokovic have between them claimed the last eleven Majors.

Since the end of last season the rest of the field has made up *some* ground, but not much. In 2011 there were no first-time Major finalists for the first time since 1964, and no first time Major semifinalists for the first time in the Open Era. With only the US Open to come, we're on track to repeat that in 2012. So far this year one player has reached his maiden Masters final (John Isner in Indian Wells), although none have reached their first semifinal. However, there are three more Masters events to play this season, and these figures may change before the year is out. Someone entirely new might win a Masters 1000 event. But it is hardly likely. Even when someone else gets close, they're never all that close.

Sometimes they aren't close at all. As tennis contests go, today's final languished well-shy of compelling. Again, critics have been quick to blame Toronto's reduced field. But it's interesting to note that an unsatisfying finale is entirely in keeping with recent practice at this level. In the last 12 months, only one Masters final has been close, or even closer than one-sided. That was the excellent match between Federer and Tomas Berdych in Madrid, on the allegedly unplayable cobalt powder of the Caja Magica. No other Masters final has even stretched to a deciding set, which is a problem given their designation as the ATP's premiere events. Exactly what are they showcasing?

Gasquet should feel no shame in being beaten so thoroughly, although one hopes he feels at least a little chagrined at submitting to it so readily. His trusted strategy of malingering in the spare acreage beyond the baseline and inviting opponents forward via a complex series of miss-hit forehands was never going to trouble Djokovic, and so the Frenchman deserves no credit at all for sticking with it. His only chance at winning was to attack, without relent, and probably without much restraint. I realise this isn't his natural mode when facing a top player, but given that his natural mode naturally ensures he loses these matches fairly quickly, he never really have the option of playing naturally and winning. There's no use to be gained from making peace with your lot: you adapt or you lose.

Although he has admitted elsewhere that he grows too passive under pressure, I'm not convinced he truly believes it. At one point late in today's match Djokovic followed a deep firm approach into the net. Gasquet, stranded somewhere remote and wide of the Toronto sign, essayed a flashy backhand pass. It looked gorgeous, and plonked uselessly into the net. Afterwards he remonstrated with himself over the technique, even though the technique wasn't the problem. The problem was that he was attempting to make a

desperate pass on the full stretch from three or four meters beyond the baseline. Djokovic is a capable volleyer rather than an accomplished one, but even he must have felt disappointed at only winning eleven of twelve trips to the net.

Ultimately, I'm not convinced that the result would have been different regardless of what Gasquet tried. Djokovic has looked like a rejuvenated player on the North American hardcourts this week, perhaps ironically given his ongoing tussles with jet-lag, exhaustion, Olympic disappointment, needling spectators, 34-year-old Germans, Canadian weather and unspecified 'personal problems'. (Personal problems really are the 'producer credit' of the ailment cosmos. Who among us lacks for personal problems? What we really lack is sufficient notoriety whereby barely-remembered figures from our youth are willing to come forward and expound upon these problems on our behalf.) Anyway, despite being beset on all sides, or perhaps because of it, Djokovic is once again looking dangerous, moving beautifully and defending impenetrably. He had more points to defend than anyone coming into the US Summer, and by retaining the Canadian Masters title with seemingly little effort, he has given himself the best of all chances.

Not Unlike Gazpacho

Cincinnati Masters, Days One to Four

The big news this week at the Mason (Ohio) Masters was that **Brian Baker** won his first match on North American hardcourts, from only his fifth attempt. He defeated **Philipp Kohlschreiber**. According to some reports, this victory 'avenged' Baker's earlier loss to the German at Wimbledon, since a thirst for vengeance is assuredly the ideal thing for an elite athlete to cultivate as they approach any given match. He then lost his next match, to **Bernard Tomic**. I imagine he'll have to extract revenge for that one at a later date. Hopefully he has a little notebook, so that he can keep track of all these vendettas. Given his recent dip in form, he's been racking up a few.

I'm not convinced Baker is that kind of guy. The early chapters of his storied comeback, which unfolded on Continental clay and English grass, were permeated by a sense of wonderment that any player could, from nowhere, win so many fine matches against so many fine players. The latter chapters, currently taking place on North America's hardcourts, are mostly characterised by bafflement that he can now barely beat anyone at all. He made it all look so easy, but it turns out professional tennis is actually pretty hard. One doubts whether Baker himself was ever likely to forget this, even as he

pushed to the Nice final, or the Wimbledon fourth round, and as patriotic feature articles emerged daily from major news sites.

I'd guess a handy sense of perspective was instilled into his gradually reknitting sinews, muscles and bones even as he lay recuperating from his 253rd consecutive bout of surgery. He seems a firmly-grounded and off-handedly modest sort, so it is hard to see that he'll ever get ahead of himself. It is his newly accrued fans that need to be reined in, since some have surged very far ahead of themselves indeed. The merest stumble would see them crushed beneath his onrushing bandwagon, even if it is growing lighter and more rickety by the day. Such a vehicle can still break your back if you're caught under it, especially Baker's, which is powered by revenge, and is therefore a kind of post-apocalyptic Mad Max-type affair. Much like Lukáš Rosol, who audaciously upset Rafael Nadal in what might well turn out to be the Spaniard's last match for the season, Baker has discovered that the devoted following one attracts upon achieving a breakthrough win can evaporate almost as quickly if you don't sustain your form indefinitely. Most bandwagons start to steer a trifle wonkily by this point, as the suspension becomes irreparably shot from having so many people constantly jumping on and off. This, incidentally, is why you should never buy a bandwagon second-hand.

No one needs to tell **Tommy Haas** this. He has devoted the worst part of a decade illustrating just how hard tennis can be, especially on the shoulders and the soul. Few players' bandwagons have experienced more breakdowns and collisions. Haas' once mighty, purring Daimler engine has sputtered and coughed through recent years, and it was hard to see how it could keep going much longer. That's how it goes. Machines break down. But now, suddenly, it's as though the second law of thermodynamics has been temporarily suspended, or even reversed. He's back, and looking rather strikingly like a top ten player, which at the current rate of ascent he soon will be. For the second week in a row Haas defeated **David Nalbandian** – another veteran whose bandwagon as seen better days – although this week's instalment was superior. Haas again saved match points. It merits mention that Nalbandian has not won a match since the Queens final, which I recall being utterly without incident. Anyway, Haas today lost to **Juan Martin del Potro**, which was a shame in at least one respect, since it would have propelled the German back into the top twenty. Instead it was nice for del Potro, who has shrewdly chosen to remain in good form following the Olympics. Lucky fellow that he is, he'll now get to demonstrate this against **Viktor Troicki**.

Later on **Roger Federer** overcame **Alex Bogomolov Jnr** in precisely one hour, which proved slightly too soon for the stirring comeback the Russian had planned. This wasn't his fault. As they changed over for the final time at 5/2, Bogomolov was heard

demanding of the umpire how long the second set had thus far lasted. The umpire must have been sorely tempted to reply 'not long,' but showed commendable restraint, especially given Bogomolov's challenging tone. It turned out the Russian was actually inquiring after the racquet he'd sent off for restringing after the first set. It hadn't come back. Two things became clear. Firstly, this was somehow the umpire's fault. Secondly, without his freshly restrung racquet, there would be no comeback. Federer was through, and it's entirely possible he didn't realise how lucky he'd been.

Federer will play Tomic in the third round. The young Australian has already beaten **Ryan Harrison** and Baker, and so should be amply prepared, come what may. He'll be keen on revenge for the Australian Open. Meanwhile **Novak Djokovic** has earned the right to face **Nikolay Davydenko** in what would have been a gripping third round encounter in late 2009. Davydenko used to beat everyone back then, but has since given that away, in order that he might fully explore other outcomes, namely losing a lot. Lots of his opponents are now settling old debts.

Stan Wawrinka temporarily left off tweeting photos of himself in order to thrash **David Ferrer**. Wawrinka's rousing pride at this accomplishment was clearly evident in the next round of photos, which all featured himself. Others have largely ignored Wawrinka's role in the outcome, and have instead taken it as an invitation to agonise over what this will mean for the US Open, since Ferrer will be seeded fourth there, owing to Nadal's withdrawal. What it will mean is that Federer and Djokovic, as top seeds, will be drawn to meet either Ferrer or Andy Murray in the semifinals. There appears to be broad consensus that, all else being equal, one would prefer to face the Spaniard than the Scot. What is mostly forgotten is that there's no guarantee anyone will face anyone. In other words, it's really not worth worrying about. The main thing is that Ferrer gets another shot at Wawrinka, and a chance at revenge.

Words to Live By

Cincinnati Masters, Quarterfinal

(1) Federer d. (10) Fish, 6/3 7/6

Roger Federer tonight defeated Mardy Fish in two highly entertaining sets of tennis at the Lindner Family Tennis Center, lest you retain any vestigial doubt as to the sport at which they competing, or the venue where it occurred. (I don't know who the Lindners are, or why they'd need an entire tennis centre all to themselves, but I am grateful that they permit the ATP and WTA to stage concurrent tennis tournaments there each

August.) Federer and Fish contested the final here two years ago. That match was longer, but this one was better.

This was aggressive, fast court tennis near its finest, for all the talk through the early part of the week was that Cincinnati's surface, hitherto among tour's quickest, had been slowed disastrously. The species of fan who endlessly laments this development in professional tennis wasted no time adding Cincinnati to the long list of tournaments that have allegedly bowed to the merciless directives of the governing body, which won't rest until every final lasts six hours, and every player's knees are reduced to uncushioned husks. But then Federer remarked that the conditions were still quick, and bouncy. Presumably he's in on the conspiracy, too, as head of the Player's Council. From where I was sitting - directly behind the court and across the Pacific Ocean - it seemed fast enough. Unquestionably it wasn't the fastest court I've ever seen, but it was fast enough to encourage attacking tennis like tonight's. I guess I'm in on it, as well.

Federer was peerless through the first set, in which he broke emphatically at the very beginning and imperiously at the very end. The first break came in the opening game amidst a hail of winners. The second was achieved with a backhand return up the line that Fish hardly moved for, then only paused for in order to register it kissing the line, before spinning and stalking to his chair, whereupon he upbraided the umpire for a while. I gather this is a technique the USTA instructs its players in from a formative age, and which will one day enable Ryan Harrison to surpass those of his fellows needlessly burdened by reticence. Mohamed Lahyani had indeed made an incorrect overrule earlier in the set, on a point that was in no way pivotal, and Fish wasn't going to rest until Mo had admitted his error publicly. It seemed important at the time.

It's possible that Fish's aggravation really owed to his having dropped serve again, from 30-0 up, although he had only himself to blame, having needlessly 'exposed himself' with a crosscourt forehand to the waiting Federer. 'It's not good to expose yourself on a tennis court,' remarked Doug Adler in the booth. 'Or anywhere, really,' replied Nick Lester. Words to live by.

For whatever reason, the American lifted perceptibly as the second set got under way, his first serve much improved, his footwork energised, his backhand unreadable. Lahyani overruled again, but correctly, on a ball that was at least half a foot in. Fish was having none of it, though, and challenged with the kind of perfunctory petulance Federer usually reserves for Hawkeye. Astoundingly, it was in. The tennis was superb from both men, however: many points covering the entire court, serves thundering down, passing shots

flashing by, and winners coming in a steady torrent. It was hard to see how it could get much better.

Then Kiss Cam was unleashed at the next change of ends, proving that the only thing more engaging than high quality night-time tennis is cajoling American couples to smooch for the amusement of their peers. Federer later admitted that he sometimes finds the antics on Kiss Cam - they're *people*, and they're *kissing* - amusing enough that it almost breaks his concentration, although you wouldn't know it from his calmly reserved on-court demeanour. I sometimes wonder at the control he exerts in order to subsume his natural tendency towards goofy laughter.

Fish, his own serve now humming along nicely, began to inflict some dents on Federer's games. Several times Fish moved to 0-30, although I cannot recall that he ever made it further than that. Federer generally produced four excellent points to seal these games, although in one case his framed backhand pass inspired sufficient indecision in Fish that the American let it go, and was more dismayed than thrilled when it plonked in. Fish saved a match point in the twelfth game with a sharp serve up the T, just as he'd done on a set point in the first set. Then it was the tiebreak, and it was as taut and skilful as the rest of the set, except for a Fish backhand winner that missed the court by inches, and a backhand pass that clipped the tape and would have bounded wide had Federer not slammed it away for a winner.

Adler had by now grown a touch unhinged by the world No.1's numinous elegance, and commenced an overlong and not-especially original comparison of Federer to a ballet dancer. Robbie Koenig had relieved the affable Lester after the first set, but even his quaint determination to remark on the actual match proved powerless to impede his co-commentator's momentum, even when Federer was producing further miracles of torque and pace before their very eyes. 'Fish didn't think that was going over!' exclaimed Koenig. Adler was not to be distracted: 'No, of course not. He's like Baryshnikov. *Floating.*' Federer took the match on his third match point, with another typically balletic trip to the net behind the kind of scything crosscourt forehand that Vaslav Nijinsky was once renowned for. He and Fish exchanged warm sentiments at the net, although the merciful absence of Kiss Cam saved this from becoming truly awkward.

Fish reached the semifinals here last year, and will therefore shed some points by losing a round earlier. Indeed, he will fall outside the top twenty, and Andy Roddick will take over as the second ranked American (behind John Isner). It wasn't so long ago that it felt odd when Fish surpassed Roddick to become the top-ranked American. Now it feels vaguely unreal that he's fallen back below him. Apparently we've come a long way, but I

cannot say in which direction. Federer will play Stanislas Wawrinka in the semifinals, who beat Milos Raonic in another excellent match earlier in the day. (Wawrinka, as ever, celebrated victory by nearly overloading Twitter with photos of himself, although he hasn't grown so proud that he doesn't take due care to retweet anyone's else pictures of him as well.) If Federer wins that match, and reaches the final, he is guaranteed to retain the No.1 ranking even if Novak Djokovic wins the title. Djokovic and Juan Martin del Potro will contest the other semifinal.

A Kind of Partnership

Cincinnati Masters, Final

(1) Federer d. (2) Djokovic, 6/0 7/6

Prior to today's Cincinnati Masters final, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic had played 82 sets in 27 matches, but in none of those sets had either man failed to win a single game. There'd never been a bagel. Twenty minutes after play commenced today, Federer inflicted the first of their rivalry. An hour after that, the world No.1 saved a lone set point with an easy overhead, and sealed his fifth Cincinnati title with a pair of winners, his 27th and 28th for the match. This is his third Masters victory of the year, and his 21st overall, which places him equal with Rafael Nadal once more. It is the third time Federer has claimed a title without dropping serve, and the seventh tournament that he has won at least five times. As ever when he wins, records are broken, even if, increasingly, the broken records were already his own. As ever when he wins, there's fun to be had merely in recounting the numbers. I know I've said this before. I suspect I'll say it again.

It's always tricky to work out just how well a given player is playing when his opponent isn't playing well at all – the reverse is also true – and especially so when the top players face each other. Federer's fans will insist he was majestic. Djokovic's fans will believe their man was execrable. The two positions aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, but the truth generally resides somewhere in between. I may be inviting stern remonstrations by saying so, but I don't think it is really possible for any of the top four to bagel each other if both men are at (or near) their best. Ivan Ljubicic remarked perceptively that whatever else, these guys are at the top because they're supreme defenders, and, on his day, Djokovic's defence is arguably the most creative and impenetrable of all.

Defensively and offensively, Djokovic lingered some considerable distance from his best in today's first set (50% first serves, four double faults, and winning 10% on second serve), while Federer approached his (thirteen winners to just four unforced errors, and

100% success behind his second serve). Producing a 6/0 set thus required them both to work in a kind of partnership. With that common goal in mind, achieving it didn't take long. These guys are pros, after all. Gratifyingly, Federer more or less agreed with me. Quizzed about the opening set on court afterwards he remarked that 'Novak obviously didn't play that well. He did donate me some double faults and some easy forehand errors and maybe some backhand errors he normally doesn't do.' By contrast, the world No.1 was untouchable on serve, unpassable at the net, and dominant in rallies long and short.

As yet another forehand found the corner, and the players strutted and strolled to their respective chairs, social media exploded in bagel-related puns. There aren't many of these, all told, and once you've heard a few you've heard them all. And so we heard them all, again and again. Tropologically, they did not exceed the following parameters:

- 'The Federer bakery is open today!' (*synecdoche*);
- 'Djokovic is surely savouring this treat!' (*irony*);
- 'Federer must be hungry to serve up such tasty baked goods!' (*idiocy*, and betraying a basic misunderstanding of what hunger is).

Bud Collins, who coined the term 'bagel', has much to answer for.

The Serbian held serve to open the second set, however, and the feeling, suddenly, was that battle was belatedly joined. If not the best point, then the funnest point of the match came in the next game, when Djokovic steamed in behind a fine approach but failed to put away four successive volleys before he was finally passed. 'Oh, that's brilliant!' erupted Robbie Koenig in the commentary box, 'That's circa 1985 at its very best. Djokovic patrolling the net like a *Rottweiler*!' Federer went on to hold.

In fact, Federer held every game in the second set, just as he'd held every game in the first set, and in his first four matches. Indeed, only Alex Bogomolov Jr and Stan Wawrinka even contrived break *points* against him – three between them – though neither proved up to the task of taking one. It's worth pointing out that Djokovic hadn't been broken before the final, either, and he set about demonstrating why as the second set tore forward into the tiebreak. Suddenly they were both playing well. Djokovic demonstrated the depth of his engagement via a series of frustrated bellows, culminating in an anguished cry of '*Da li je moguće?!*' 'Is that possible?!'

Djokovic has always seemed particularly vulnerable towards the close of tight sets, and as far as I can tell he loses 7/5 more often than he should. I confess I have no sound statistical evidence to back this up, but as recently as the Olympics, he lost three such

sets in his last two matches. Three years ago in the Cincinnati final he fell to Federer 6/1 7/5. It's possible that this resonant score line was echoing around in the Serbian's mind as he served at 5/5. Possible, but frankly unlikely, although it would explain the purposeful aplomb with which he held serve to 15 that game, with a pair of crosscourt forehand winners, and a backhand up the line to roughly the same spot, which Federer not only could watch, but did.

Momentum slouched about drunkenly in the tiebreak, first cadging money off Djokovic, then trying it on with Federer's wife, before throwing up behind the couch. Djokovic set momentum straight with a stern dressing-down, and then saved a match point with the coiled aggression he typically reserves for such moments. He then blew his own set point with a quite ill-advised topspin lob, which his opponent dispatched gratefully. Two points and a pair of Federer forehand winners later, and it was done. The Swiss, true to his word, did not leap into his player's box.

It is Federer's fifth Cincinnati Masters title. Consequently, he now owns a number of those daft urns, meaning he's finally equipped to inter the remains of all the tiny sailors should his eldritch Dubai flotilla meet a gruesome end. Does it even need to be said that he has become the first man to win Cincinnati five times? This was also his 76th career title, which moves him to one behind John McEnroe, who is third on the all-time list. I'm going to venture out on a very shaky limb, and suggest that Federer will exceed McEnroe's count before he eventually retires. As solid as my conviction is, I must confess that I haven't always believed in the strength of it. This is what I wrote after the Stockholm final in 2010:

For the record, it was Federer's 64th Tour level title, meaning that he is now tied with Pete Sampras at 4th on the all-time list, behind Connors (109), Lendl (94), and McEnroe (77). The question has been bandied about: Will he pass McEnroe? The answer is no, probably not. For him to get another 14 titles, he would have to start playing more of these little 250 events, at precisely the age when that's the last thing he should be doing. Not gonna happen.

I stand corrected. Presuming to know what Federer would do based on his age was my first error. Believing that only minor titles would enable him to pass McEnroe was my second. My third was using the word 'bandied', and the phrase 'Not gonna happen'. Only the last mistake is unforgivable, since Federer has for some time been demonstrating that every avowed expert was wrong about the allegedly purpling twilight of his career. He is the world No.1, and will be top seed at next week's US Open, where Djokovic is the defending champion. Indeed, with today's victory over Djokovic Federer has extended

his lead such that he will remain No.1 even if he decides to give New York a miss. *Not gonna happen.*

Luck of the Draw: US Open 2012

It is amidst considerable fanfare and with a sense of ungovernable arousal that I announce the release of the newly updated and proudly unabridged second edition of *Bracketology, the Reading of Draws , and Why Men Have to Sleep Around*.

Bracketology is widely acknowledged to be the definitive text in the thrilling field of draw analysis. Published by The Next Point Enterprises, which has previously brought you such treasures as the *Roger Rasheed 2012 Desk Calendar* and the *Marcos Baghdatis Guide to Racquet Care*, *Bracketology* has been released to coincide with the US Open. It is certain to be treasured by evolutionary psychologists and unrepentant adulterers alike.

This second edition was necessitated by the rankings shift that occurred after Wimbledon. Now that Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic occupy the top two spots, the thrill has rather gone out of discovering whether they've been drawn to meet in the semifinals – hitherto the primary Stage of any draw perusal – since this configuration is now technically impossible. We find ourselves in strange new territory. Federer and Djokovic have never been seeded one and two at a Major, so if they meet it'll be in the final (or maybe awkwardly at a nice restaurant, where they'll nod hello but then have to sit at nearby tables pretending the other one isn't there, until one of them leaves and so will have to say goodbye so it doesn't seem too weird). Despite obligatory assurances that they're looking no further ahead than their next match, I've no doubt Federer and Djokovic are still eyeing each other off from across the draw – calculatingly, warily, and then maybe sleepily. It's just that there are now 126 other guys in the way. Maintaining line of sight is problematic.

Of these other guys, two in particular stand out. The persistent absence of world No.3 Rafael Nadal has seen Andy Murray and David Ferrer percolate up into the third and fourth seedings. Whose half each settled in was of utmost importance. Before the draw was released the real fun to be had was watching pundits endeavour to delicately suggest that Ferrer was a significantly more attractive opponent for either of the top two than Murray, without unduly insulting the Spaniard. The phrase 'with all due respect' saw a lot of work. Taylor Dent didn't even bother with that courtesy at today's draw ceremony, eliciting his share of disapproval. I guess Ferrer had to find out some time that Murray is a more accomplished hardcourter than him. Anyway, the draw is now out, and Murray is in Federer's half, while Ferrer is in Djokovic's. Djokovic's fans are surely pleased. Federer's fans surely aren't. Let's be honest. With all due respect.

Some fans were noisily convinced that Murray would *inevitably* block their hero's path to glory, and were vaguely disappointed when this didn't happen. They were consequently denied the opportunity to wallow in the mundane *a posteriori* smugness that compels one to declare 'Never in doubt!' when random outcomes are achieved. To do so is apparently regarded as some kind of duty, one that has now fallen to the opposing camp, who've given their mordancy full voice. Remember, Stage One of draw analysis is all about righteous indignation. By no means am I suggesting that all fans are this way, or even most of them, but by god some of them are, and they're invariably the loudest ones. To those Federer fans who are worried about the semifinals, it's worth remembering that Federer defeated Djokovic and Murray back to back in winning the 2008 US Open. Indeed, he also did it last month at Wimbledon.

It's also worth remembering that any such meeting is weeks away. Before then come all the matches that every player is avowedly determined not to look further than. Federer certainly wouldn't dare to gaze beyond Donald Young, whose one-match winning streak was cruelly cut short in Winston-Salem this week, though that one win had the deleterious effect of pushing Vince Spadea's record losing streak beyond reach. Beyond that, Federer has a slightly tougher path to the semifinals than Djokovic, but marginally easier than Murray. Ferrer has the toughest path of all, which has in turn necessitated the artful intimation that he is unlikely to get that far.

It is Ferrer's quarter of the draw that holds the more profound interest for unaligned onlookers, and the greatest opportunities for those men trapped within it. Besides Ferrer – who I delicately submit may well reach the semifinals – the names that stand forth are Janko Tipsarevic and John Isner. Tipsarevic was tremendous for a few sets against Djokovic in the quarterfinals here last year, as was Isner against Murray at the same stage. Tommy Haas is also in here – how grand would a semifinal run be – and he'll open against Ernests Gulbis, which could be either the greatest or worst first round encounter of all time. Gulbis features heavily in the cautionary chapter of *Bracketology* entitled 'Getting One's Hopes Up'.

However, I'm going to venture out on a very diseased, aging and shaky limb, and declare with absolute certainty that the quarterfinalists in this section will be Mikhail Youzhny and Philipp Kohlschreiber. In the second round Kohlschreiber will face the winner of Grigor Dimitrov and Benoit Paire, which will also be a first-round to tell your children about, if only as a salutary warning. I also note the presence of Tobias Kamke and Cedrik-Marcel Stebe in this section. I'm going to go right ahead and call it the German quarter.

Speaking of intriguing first round encounters, other stand-outs include Bernard Tomic and Carlos Berlocq; a potential tennis match heavily indebted to M.C. Escher, and from which no spectator will emerge entirely sane. Expect Nikolay Davydenko's first round dust-up with Qualifier to be close. I don't know who the qualifier will be yet, but I have every faith that the Russian will find a way to make it hard for himself. Philipp Petzschner somehow avoided the German quarter and will face Nicolas Mahut. I think that'll be good. The reasons why I think this are, I suspect, buried very deep indeed.

I also have a strange feeling David Goffin will pose special problems for Tomas Berdych. The Belgian has great hands, nimble feet, very delicate cheekbones and a pretty bad haircut; precisely the combination to trouble the Czech on an off-day, which is the only kind of day he knows lately. It'd be like seeing a woodland elf take down the Terminator, which I believe was the climactic battle in a discarded early draft of *The Hobbit*. Finally, Juan Martin del Potro and his collection of troubled wrists take on David Nalbandian, which looks tough on paper, until we realise that the piece of paper is spattered with linesman's blood, and that the elder Argentine hasn't won a single match since the blood haze descended at Queens. The new edition of *Bracketology* also has a chapter on Nalbandian. For a certain type of psychologist - all of them - the man is a goldmine.

The Far Side of the World

Winston-Salem, Final

(3) Isner d. (2) Berdych, 3/6 6/4 7/6

John Isner yesterday spent almost two and a half hours defeating Tomas Berdych in the final at Winston-Salem, eventually saving three match points in the third set tiebreaker. The American has therefore defended his second title of the year, but he wasn't permitted long to wallow about in glory. Owing to previous commitments, the subsequent trophy ceremony had to be cut short. Both Isner and Berdych were immediately hustled aboard a chartered Learjet to New York, where they were scheduled to deliver the first in a series of public lectures entitled 'How to Prepare for a Slam'. They will be joined by Nicolas Almagro, whose work in this field is unparalleled. One presumes that Isner has grown so accustomed to early-round exhaustion at majors that he figures he might as well turn up in that state. We could say that this saves time, but time is exactly what it doesn't save.

If the final wasn't the most exciting match played in Winston-Salem this week, it was certainly the most exciting one I saw. Admittedly I only watched four, and most of those would have been objectively dull even if the coverage hadn't conspired to make them

almost unwatchable. One of the outside courts apparently didn't have a camera installed, and so instead relayed the feed from a geosynchronous satellite orbiting some 200 miles directly above. Ernests Gulbis' inevitable implosion against Marcel Granollers proved far less enthralling from this remote perspective. I couldn't even get worked up about his extravagant racquet smash in the third set, a tactic that otherwise throws me into a frenzy.

It's true that the full excitement of a live sporting event is never entirely captured by a telecast, especially an event as exuberant as Winston-Salem undeniably was, where as many as twenty locals at a time turned out to watch the early round matches. But if I'm going to be awake in the middle of the night – the usual window in which Australian tennis aficionados operate – I'd prefer it to capture some of what it is like to be there. For those of us at the far end of the earth, the coverage provides the medium in which live tennis unfolds. Even if it can't be unforgettable, I'd like it to be watchable. But I'd prefer unforgettable.

The first tennis tournament I ever watched was Wimbledon in 1986, when an eighteen-year-old Boris Becker became the first teenager to win the title since he'd won it the year before. I myself was only ten, and so wouldn't have my shot at winning it as a teenager for another few years. My mother, who has always been a keen sports fan, was working late nights as a waitress at the time, and she asked me to watch the tennis for her each night. I was happy to oblige, since it meant I got to stay up late. (If she had to work the day-shift, then I was instead obliged to watch *Days of Our Lives*, which I enjoyed less, although I don't think it had any lasting ill-effects. It certainly doesn't explain why I'm mainly attracted to women who turn out to be their own long-lost twin sister, with amnesia.)

Anyway, following Becker's progress through the draw proved entrancing. That shock of red hair, that strange swaying service motion, those pale trunk-like thighs emerging from scandalously brief shorts, the diving. He was *exciting*, which may come as a surprise to those who came to tennis later, and mainly know him for his tireless contributions towards the sum total of Twitter's inanity. His Wimbledon title the year before had been audacious and accomplished, especially for one so young (although he didn't seem so young to a ten-year-old, even one whose yearnings had been darkened by daytime soap operas), but the second time round he tore into the tournament with breathtaking vigour.

Meanwhile Ivan Lendl, the uncontested world No.1, ground his way mercilessly through strong opposition in the draw's top half. To a lad growing up in the eighties, with the

cloying threat of nuclear holocaust overlaying everything, the idea that Lendl was really a terrifying robot from beyond the Iron Curtain found a ready recipient. He's since proved otherwise, but at the time he combined the on-court panache of Berdych with the sartorial elegance of Radek Stepanek. I couldn't bear the thought of him winning. He and Becker, the plucky young West German – remember this was pre-Unification – were destined to meet in the final. Mum and I watched it together, late at night, and Becker won. We danced about the room. I was hooked, and have never stopped associating the sport with exhaustion and elation and darkness pressing against the windows. A year later, this time in Sydney, my mother and I watched as Pat Cash defeated Lendl in the final, and inaugurated that modern practice of bounding joyfully into the stands. Mum wept openly.

Years later, I was in Vietnam when Gustavo Kuerten defeated Magnus Norman in the 2000 Roland Garros final, watching on rapt from a jazz bar in Hanoi's French Quarter. I'd been backpacking just long enough that my sense of value was skewed, and so the Long Island Iced Teas we were drinking felt like an extravagance, for all that they only cost 45,000 dong, which was about three dollars. It was the first tennis match I'd watched since the Miami final some months earlier (a wonderful encounter between Sampras and Kuerten), and it produced the strongest urge to be home in Australia, which isn't quite the expected effect of observing a Brazilian and Swede battle it out under a dreary sky in Paris. I felt dislocated. And, admittedly, pretty drunk. I liked Kuerten, and was thrilled when he won. I celebrated with another drink.

The following year's French Open final was horribly marred by strong winds, although this helped Alex Corretja make it close against Kuerten, who was now the beloved world No.1. I was 25, and had arrived in the Far North Queensland rainforest that very afternoon. It was now late at night, and my father was snoring at his typically nightmarish intensity. It almost competed with the volume of the jungle at night, which anyone who has experienced it will tell you is the most unholy racket imaginable: squawks, crackles, cackles, grunts, crashings, flappings, growls, gurgles, screeches and thuds. There's no cacophony like it. I tried to ignore it as Kuerten defended his title. I was very happy. He was now my favourite player.

The 2001 US Open quarterfinal between Sampras and Andre Agassi was considered by some at the time to be the greatest match ever played, and certainly it felt like it as it happened. It was an evening match in New York, one of those late night classics the tournament is justly famous for, which meant it was late-morning in Melbourne, where I was now living. If Kuerten was my favourite player, Sampras wasn't far behind in my regard, and my unlikely affection was only heightened by a natural antipathy towards

Agassi and the fact that Pistol Pete's decline was by now well-progressed. He hadn't beaten Agassi in almost two years. Indeed, Sampras hadn't even won a title since Wimbledon the year before, and his task in New York was monumental. In order to reach the final, he would have to defeat every US Open champion besides himself from the last nine years. I wasn't moving from my television for anything. Then, three games in, the power went out in my suburb. Disaster.

This was an era when the internet was largely pornography, and even that couldn't be streamed live. Presumably there were smartphone apps, but there were no smartphones upon which to run them. Thinking fast, I pedalled maniacally to the University, where they had a small 51cm television in the foyer of the Sports Centre. There were already three or four people lingering there, and I grabbed the last remaining white plastic chair and planted myself. By the time the fourth set tiebreaker came round and the Flushing crowd spontaneously interrupted play with a sustained standing ovation, that foyer was packed. There had been no breaks of serve, and the standard of play was otherworldly. Students and staff had happened by for any number of reasons – to book a squash court or go to the gym – had glanced at the screen, and then hadn't left. No one had left. As Sampras took the final point, and the Steadycam swooped in and circled his exultant figure, a spontaneous cheer went up on the far side of the world, in the Melbourne University Sports Centre foyer.

It didn't last. It was now early afternoon, and everyone had somewhere else to be, somewhere they should have been hours earlier. The excitement leaked away, and the crowd broke apart. I remained in my plastic seat, savouring the fleeting moment, which is all an anxious tennis fan can afford. After all, Sampras had Safin up next. It was no time to relax.

On that note, I think I'm ready. Bring on the US Open.

For the Non-Believers

US Open, Days One and Two

My proposal to have the first round of the US Open main draw spread over five days has, it seems, fallen on unreceptive ears. I believe this to be a shame, since it fulfilled so many of the cherished goals of the tournament's organisers, such as diluting the level of excitement through the early going, ensuring that at least one of the eventual male finalists is crippled by exhaustion, and guaranteeing that said final will take place sometime in the following week. Their counter-argument was that there are already

sufficient measures in place to assure these outcomes. (For example, inspired by last year, they have installed new pumps under all the showcourts, which at the flick of a switch will push noisome and bubbling swamp fluids up through the court surface, thereby causing David Ferrer to shrug slightly, and Andy Roddick to go into cardiac arrest.) If these don't do the trick, they contend, then there's always the weather.

But weather, according to biblical authority, is a fickle thing. Notwithstanding the US Open's careful placement within hurricane season, there remains a slim chance that several days of play *won't* be lost to driving squalls and showers, and that when players *are* able to take to the court their efforts won't be fatally hampered by outraged southerly zephyrs. Of course this issue could be addressed by relocating the whole thing to New Orleans, or, better, to the flight deck of the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, currently patrolling the North Atlantic. These suggestions also featured in my proposal.

Fortunately such measures won't be necessary this year. Even as I write, Hurricane Isaac has crossed the Louisiana coast. With any luck, the men will have to play their last three rounds on Wednesday afternoon, a fortnight hence. According to the preferred nomenclature of CBS, this will be a Super afternoon indeed. But my point was that it is lazy to rely upon inclement weather to wreck a timetable on its own. Ludicrous scheduling has to shoulder at least a portion of the load. A five day opening round would put it beyond doubt.¹³

Anyway, until the USTA sees the light, the first round still only lingers for a laughably brief three days, which means that we're now two thirds of the way through. World No.1 **Roger Federer** won his opening round match against world No.81 **Donald Young** on a drenching, humid opening night. The brothers McEnroe, commentating on ESPN, were scathing of their compatriot, which one assumes was an attitude they arrived with, given that the result had hardly been doubt. The issue, it was intimated, was one of belief, and that fact that Young doesn't have any, a shortcoming he has in common with everyone else. Luke Jensen, commentating on another network, echoed these sentiments in a more circumspect fashion. After Young won a strong point, Jensen proffered the advice that he should play like that all of the time. So that was the problem! But Young didn't just achieve a 17 match losing streak because he cannot play well occasionally. His achievement testifies to the fact that he can't do it often, let alone all the time. Body language aside, I'm sure he was trying his best. The week the American posted his seventeenth straight loss was the week Federer won Cincinnati

¹³ *The Australian Open almost embarrassed itself this year, when the combination of clear weather, two roofed stadiums and a two-day opening round resulted in the final being played on the second Sunday. Fortunately in the final Nadal and Djokovic set things right by playing approximately for ever in order to ensure the tournament entered a third week, as the gods intended.*

without dropping serve. There is a gulf between those two outcomes, and suggesting that it can be bridged by faith is asking a lot of a guy who has just spent an entire season demonstrating that it can't. He did break Federer's serve, though.

The same critique wasn't levelled at **Paolo Lorenzi**, who won only two games against a rampant **Novak Djokovic** (just as he did back in Melbourne, although the configuration was different). Lorenzi didn't seem to have much belief that he'd overcome the defending champion, although no one commentating sounded particularly offended at this. Indeed, the prevailing tone was more condescending than anything else. Djokovic was pretty marvellous, though. He must have believed. That's probably why he wins all the time.

I boldly predicted that **David Goffin** might upset **Tomas Berdych**, but that didn't come to pass. Sorry about that. That's on me. Indeed, Berdych even won a tiebreaker, his first since the Rome Masters. Berdych then predicted that no one besides the top three seeds have much chance of winning the tournament, thereby echoing the betting markets and every other person with even a passing interest in tennis, besides a few fans of **Juan Martin del Potro** (and perhaps del Potro himself). This realistic assessment has seen the Czech strung up by his thumbs, and liberally peppered with envenomed arrows. There's a subtle difference at play here. It is one thing to suggest that winning a given match will be *almost* impossible, but quite another to concede that it might *actually* be. The former assertion is a valorous attempt to secure the cherished underdog position, in order that any subsequent victory might be lauded as suitably heroic. The latter betrays a fundamental lack of self-belief, and certainly shouldn't be construed as merely a moment of unguarded candour by a 26-year-old athlete. By extension, we can assume that everything Berdych says must perfectly reflect his inner state. You may recall that **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga** made broadly similar remarks before the French Open – that no Frenchman would win the tournament – yet he seemed committed enough in that quarterfinal with Djokovic, and appropriately gutted when he lost. Believe it or not, these guys can say these things and still try their very best. Tsonga, incidentally, also won today. **Mardy Fish** and **Andy Murray** also won their opening matches, both in straight sets, but were roundly condemned for not winning them better. Some pundits made it known that they weren't 'convinced'. I can't decide if this is disrespectful to the beaten opponents, or just boring.

Even **Philipp Petzschner** won, and from two sets to love down, which is a nice change for him. His socks were typically magnificent. I'd predicted that his first round with **Nicolas Mahut** might be a good one. It was: cagey and desperate. It is so far my only prediction that looks even remotely like coming to pass, including the secret one

about Andrea Petkovic winning the title and then inviting me to dinner. I predicted an excellent first round encounter between del Potro and **David Nalbandian**, but Nalbandian's withdrawal has made that complicated. He has been replaced by **Florent Serra**, who I don't expect will pose quite the same problem for the 2009 champion.

Bernard Tomic today saw off **Carlos Berlocq** in a match that was rendered more straight-forward than anticipated by the fact that the Argentine didn't play especially well. Tomic will play **Roddick** in the second round, probably at night in a big, loud, lurid stadium. Given that most of Tomic's season is composed of killing time between these kinds of grand spectacles, I suspect the young Australian will rouse himself for this one. It'll be a question of belief, of course. Thank heavens he has that: 'I don't think Roddick is like the top three or four. That's definitely where I have a lot of belief. I believe I can win this match.'

On the subject of stirring recoveries, **Marin Cilic** and **Alexandr Dolgoplov** each came back from two sets down, against **Marinko Matosevic** and **Jesse Levine** respectively. I'd like to say that the issue was mental – in Dolgoplov's case it always is, I suppose, though I didn't see this match – but for Cilic it was more the case that the superior player started playing closer to his usual standard as the match progressed. Matosevic never ceased trying, to an extent that even the McEnroe's would have approved of. Sometimes one player is better at tennis than the other one. Believe it or not, this often determines the outcome, even if saying so is frowned upon.

Then Magic Happens

US Open, Days Three and Four

The 2012 US Open is barely four days old, but it has already equalled the record for the most victories achieved from two sets to love down. This record number, set back in 1989, is ten. With somewhere over half the current tournament's matches completed, that count has been matched, and there's every reason to believe it will be surpassed in the coming days. It's an obscure record, to be sure, but they can't all be important. I should also stress that these ten victories were all achieved by men. None of the women players have yet figured out a way to recover from a two set deficit, not even Kim Clijsters, who retired yesterday afternoon, whereupon she was immediately canonised by the attendant media.

Last year, if memory serves, the US Open broke the record for the most retirements at a single event. I think there were about twenty (although I should make it clear that I am

referring specifically to *tennis* events, since there were even greater casualties at the Battle of Antietam, not to mention Ypres. It's also worth registering some surprise that this record was achieved on a fairly standard hardcourt, and not, as expected, on perilous blue clay, which is said to be fashioned from crystallised nerve gas.)

Anyway, the ten men who have so far recovered from two sets down are no doubt proud to be part of history. (Their vanquished opponents were probably less thrilled, for all that some of them didn't merely snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, but ventured into victory's gullet with a lantern, a support team and a map.) Hopefully the USTA will release some appropriate memorabilia for collectors. Perhaps a set of signed espresso cups, or (better) some action figurines. The figurines, in no particular order, would be of Ernests Gulbis, Marin Cilic, Alexandr Dolgoplov, Philipp Petzschner, Paul-Henri Mathieu, Janko Tipsarevic, Gilles Muller, Fabio Fognini, Mardy Fish and Guillermo Garcia-Lopez. All figurines would be fully posable, and most would come installed with a well-worn self-destruct button. Petzschner's could be accessorised with a range of knee-socks. Tipsarevic's would talk if you pull his ripcord, or ask him for his views on women's tennis. Gulbis' figure could come in two versions, a highly collectable 'Unstoppable' model, and a more common one set to 'Underachieve'. But I digress.

The temptation, as ever, is to search for a clear pattern when something like this occurs. Theories already abound as to why this particular edition of this particular tournament has produced so many comebacks. The most convincing theory, as is often the case, is that it is a coincidence, although this regrettably makes for bad copy. Last year a similar thing happened with all the retirements. The wearisome orthodoxy emerged that players were dropping in industrial quantities due to the heroic length of the season and the physical stress caused by grippy hardcourts, notwithstanding that many of the retirements owed to upper body ailments, and at least a few were due to gastric issues. But sometimes the temptation to posit an underlying cause is irresistible. We can consequently grow prescriptive.

I don't exclude myself from this tendency. Suddenly the most fraught parts of any match occur when a player gains a two-set lead. Thus when Philipp Kohlschreiber allowed Michael Llodra to level at a set a piece one felt it to be a strategic masterstroke, although this only narrowly failed to backfire when Llodra almost served out the third. No one wants to see their favourite players up two sets to love. You're just asking for them to become a statistic.

Blake d. (24) Granollers, 6/2 6/4 6/1

This was especially the case this evening when a hitherto rampaging James Blake gained a two set advantage over Marcel Granollers. For all that no one quite rampages like Blake, he plays with such terrifically tight margins that even slight miscalibrations can prove disastrous. He is an exemplar of the rule that an uncompromising attitude only merits applause while it pays off, but generally deserves ridicule when it doesn't. So far it had worked, and he was leaving the Spaniard in his wake. Granollers was by no means playing poorly – although I'm inclined to think his current ranking of No.24 is somewhat inflated – but even at his best he would struggle against a guy whose entire game is predicated on the idea that nearly every shot be struck as hard as possible, and who was hardly missing. A better defender might have done enough to introduce some doubt into the American's mind, thereby tightening those margins still further. Granollers was trying his best – painfully so judging by the sound he was making – but his best bet, from two sets down, lay in hoping that Blake would start to miss. To be fair, most of Blake's opponents have made that bet successfully in recent years.

Gulbis yesterday spoke with typical candour about one's attitude while trailing by a couple of sets: 'The mind-set is that you don't care anymore. You're two sets down, you're a break down. You simply don't care. Then magic happens suddenly.' Not caring of course places the Latvian comfortably in the middle of his natural habitat. He has made an art-form out of indifference.

Granollers, unfortunately, isn't the type to begin lashing winners with gallows detachment. In any case he was permitted neither space nor time in which to unleash the requisite laissez faire fatalism. The magic never happened. Blake, far from rediscovering doubt, only grew more reckless in his resolve. He never stopped coming. The rampage became an onslaught, and the winner tally mounted alarmingly. He didn't face a single break point, yet won 44% of his return points, even as Granollers served at 72%. And Blake did it without once tempering his natural inclination to attack. He'll next face Milos Raonic, in what will surely be a night match on Arthur Ashe Stadium. Expect no compromise, from either of them. That's not their way.

Meltingly Warm and Liquid Quick

US Open, Days Five and Six

(3) Murray d. (30) Lopez 7/6 7/6 4/6 7/6

We're now almost three rounds deep in the 2012 US Open, and one of the top three seeds has actually dropped a set. It was bound to happen sooner or later, if only when they came to face each other. The smart money was on it happening to **Andy Murray** rather sooner than that, given his tougher draw, and so it transpired. Today he managed to defeat a gallant **Feliciano Lopez** in four sets, despite winning fewer points, boasting less comprehensive stubble, and being (ironically) less accomplished at modelling argyle knitwear. On a meltingly warm and liquid-quick day in New York, Murray won the points that mattered, especially the last one. **Roger Federer** earlier won even more of these while seeing off **Fernando Verdasco** in straight sets, to whom he likewise yields primacy in facial hair coverage, although the world No.1 has been known to rock a mean sweater when in the mood.

It was sufficiently warm that the hackneyed phrase 'brutally hot' seemed stiflingly apt even in its overuse. More pertinently, the heat proved to be decisive in quite a few of the other matches played today. The lately revitalised **Sam Querrey** did an excellent job of staying with **Tomas Berdych** for a few sets, but faded sharply upon falling behind two sets to one. In fast conditions, the Czech can be a hard man to stay with. It is, surprisingly, the first time he's reached the round of sixteen in New York since 2007. In the fourth round he'll play **Nicolas Almagro**, who beat **Jack Sock**. You may recall that Almagro and Berdych met in the same round in Melbourne earlier this year, producing a fine match that will mainly be remembered for Berdych's gifted amateur theatrics, as the Spaniard drilled a ball straight at him, whereupon Berdych rag-dolled to the court as though speared. I cannot guarantee the same thing won't happen again, or even that the tables won't be turned, even if I wanted to. The only guarantee is that ESPN will seek to heighten the 'rivalry', for all that the pair have met since, with no retribution forthcoming.

Novak Djokovic yesterday gave the good burghers who'd shelled out for Arthur Ashe tickets another reason to regret their extravagant purchase, assuming they'd been hoping to see something other than the world No.2 pulverise **Rogério Dutra Silva** for the loss of five games. It's a problem that plagues centre courts at all the Majors through the preliminary rounds. On the one hand you want to see the big names on the big courts. On the other hand you'd probably like to see some competitive matches. Through the early going, these two conditions are for the most part mutually exclusive,

especially with 32 seeds to protect the top players. The night sessions have suffered especially at this year's US Open. To a match, they've been fizzers, even the ones we'd all insisted would be close.

Actually, even as I write **Mardy Fish** has just defeated **Gilles Simon** in a bland four setter on Arthur Ashe stadium. Cruelly, the first night match of the tournament to exceed three sets was one to make viewers wish it hadn't. A lesson in being careful what you wish for, I suppose. The Frenchman was injured, which inspired him to fashion his rallies even more laboriously than usual. He served at about 150kmh for the entire match - Al Trautwig in commentary never ceased marvelling at this - which Fish somehow failed to take as an invitation to attack. When healthy, Simon's superb defence is sharpened by the real threat of sudden offence, but not tonight. Tonight it was almost all defence, barring the odd passing shot. Fish, after a perfect start, was eventually sucked deep into Simon's psychic mire, although he retained a strong enough sense of self to abuse the umpire when things ceased going his way. They went his way in the end, but he was clearly dissatisfied when interviewed afterwards, and could summon little spark in the face of Justin Gimelstob's unfettered cheer. He faces Federer next.

(20) Roddick d. Tomic, 6/3 6/4 6/0

The most hyped fizzer of the round was **Andy Roddick's** dust-up with **Bernard Tomic**, the American's first outing since he'd suddenly announced his entire support team's imminent unemployment. The occasion was huge, the stadium was enormous, the crowd was partisan, the stakes were high, the platitudes were piling skyward, and the dull parallel clauses just kept on coming. Tomic was rubbish. Roddick was excellent. There had been a prevailing feeling that the young Australian would seize this moment, and thereby provide some gratification for those who enjoy nothing more than the fulfilment of a good changing-of-the-guard narrative. This hope had been buttressed by the widespread assumption that Tomic performs best on the largest stages, although I am beginning to think this assumption relies heavily on his disappointing results on small stages. To be fair, he is only nineteen.

Afterwards Tomic was eager to quell the suggestion that he'd tanked the final set, for all that even the five points he did contrive to win came against the run of play. Given that this suggestion had been widespread, and mostly delivered as a pointed accusation, quelling it required considerable attention. He insisted, somewhat unconvincingly, that the real issue was stage fright. However, few juniors have ever been afforded more opportunities to grow accustomed to the bright lights of prime time than Tomic. And it seems strange that his stage fright became most crippling in the third set, when he'd

already been on court for an hour, after a couple of sets in which he hadn't looked to be tanking so much as merely playing badly, faced with a veteran opponent who'd unshackled himself from mortal cares.

For a match that was potentially his last, it was perhaps ironic that Roddick finally played with the boldness and conviction that most pundits have been insisting he play with for years. Back when he was the best player in the world, he played like this all the time. His forehand was feared. Then he spent the best and worst parts of a long decade almost never playing like this. At least one can now hope he'll continue to play like this for the remainder of his career, the extension of which will require defeating Fabio Fognini in the third round. Quizzed on how he'd feel for last night's match, Roddick replied that, 'I could come out and play great, or it could be the worst thing you've ever seen.' In order to prolong his career for at least one more round, he'll need defeat a guy for whom every match is like that. There is, consequently, no way of knowing what will happen.

The Second Week

US Open, Day Seven

It has occurred to me, belatedly, that my proposal to have the opening round of the US Open extended to five days carries with it a number of previously unexplored (yet important) advantages, and that highlighting these in my original submission to the USTA would have only strengthened my case. A missed opportunity, to be sure: one I rue.

Firstly, a five day opener would spread the matches out more evenly across each day, which would in turn confer several benefits: the tournament would require fewer courts – meaning some could be converted into something useful, like merchandise stalls or a roller disco – and it would permit more of the top players to play their initial rounds in the main stadium at night, thereby ensuring that fewer Arthur Ashe ticket-holders are forced to endure a remotely competitive match. Secondly, it would mean that any player who survived through the first couple of rounds would therefore feature in the second week. Seneca helpfully taught us that Majors cannot be won in the first week, only lost, a lesson that Pete Sampras famously reiterated. It therefore seems like a net benefit to have more competitors survive this ordeal, even though the US Open's now-established custom of Monday finals means that no one can win it in the second week either.

Earlier on US Open Radio, there was some discussion of precisely what making it to the second week actually entails. It is something the players talk about all the time, and the hushed reverence of their tone suggests it means more than simply remaining active in the tournament after the first Sunday ends. Nevertheless the definition remains slippery. For half the women, reaching the second week means they've made it to the quarterfinals, which is indeed something to be proud of. The other half remains stranded in the fourth round, which is where the surviving men also reside, apart from John Isner and Philipp Kohlschreiber, who as I write are yet to complete their third round match.¹⁴ It's all very confusing. Wimbledon avoids this issue by having a rest day on the middle Sunday, and by having it rain a lot on the other days. The USTA is busily implementing the second of these measures. The remnants of Hurricane Irene are even now straggling up the Eastern Seaboard. The best predictions are that they will arrive by Tuesday, and then settle in like a disgraced uncle with nowhere else to be, who just will not take the hint to leave, even when you pack his bags for him, and point out that those bed sores might clear up if he would only get out of your favourite armchair.

(5) Ferrer d. (WC) Hewitt, 7/6 4/6 6/3 6/0

Lleyton Hewitt will not feature in the second week, having fallen late in the first week to David Ferrer. Hewitt failed to win a game in the last set, yet competed with enough gusto that we may regard his defeat as gallant, in contrast to Bernard Tomic several days ago, who pulled off the same feat but suffered immediate crucifixion. Not all bagels are created equal. I think Orwell said something about this. (I will resist the opportunity to extend this metaphor, for any number of reasons, but mainly because I'm not especially solid on how bagels are made – I know they're boiled, but whenever I boil bread the result is quite disappointing – and it would just take up room.) The truth is that Hewitt is congenitally incapable of a performance as insipid as Tomic's against Andy Roddick, regardless of which explanation for Tomic's performance we accept. I doubt Hewitt has ever been stage-struck, and I cannot imagine he has ever tanked a set. It's rare for him to throw away a point, although he is not above blowing some very important ones.

Indeed, this is an important point to bear in mind about Hewitt. Despite his hard-won reputation as the sport's scrappiest scrapper, Hewitt does have a tendency to grow careless with leads, and he can generally be relied upon to make his own life harder if given the opportunity. For a while some felt that he was only comfortable with his back to the wall, and would therefore retreat until he felt the kiss of the brickwork against his

¹⁴ *Kohlschreiber ended up defeating Isner in five sets, at 2:26am local time. Isner therefore technically enjoyed a brief stint in the second week, the definition of which grows ever more fluid.*

shoulder blades. Only then could his fighting instincts kick in. Certainly more of his matches have devolved into life and death tussles than seemed strictly necessary. This was the case even during his extended sojourn atop the rankings – a nearly forgotten 80 weeks, now an eternal decade past – but has only grown more definitive in his career's endless twilight, at least in those rare periods when he ventures away from the operating table. It was especially evident today during the first set tiebreaker, when he led Ferrer 6-3, and in total failed to take any of five set points.

It's worth bearing mind that Ferrer is himself not an especially strong tiebreak player, although his record this year is considerably better than any other year (15-9), and well above his career average, which is *decidedly* average (106-102). The Spaniard's reputation as a fighter is as justified as Hewitt's, but contrary to popular belief neither man represents the *ne plus ultra* in mental composure. They fight because they must, because fighting is preferable to Tomic's alternative, but both are still obliged to fight far more often than they should. Then again, Hewitt has the excuse that he's no longer the player he was, while Ferrer is the world No.5, and needs make no excuses to anyone.

There was a time when Hewitt might have outlasted Ferrer, but it was long ago. Ornerly attrition wasn't likely to prove a winning tactic today, especially after a prolonged five-setter against Gilles Muller two days earlier. Having correctly surmised that it was all or nothing, Hewitt set about giving it everything. Suddenly bold, he stepped into the court and hustled Ferrer off it, earning a coveted break early on then hoarding it until the end. This gave his fans another excuse to lament those squandered first set points, but I doubt even a two set lead would have done more than prolong the eventual outcome. Naturally anything can happen in sport, but there was still a firm sense that Ferrer would run him down, eventually, no matter how long it took. The Australian was once the fittest man in the sport, but not anymore. The spirit remains staunch, but the flesh has parted too often beneath the surgeon's knife, and suffered too much rehabilitation and mortification still to comply with its master's will. Conversely, while there were times in his peak years when Hewitt might sustain reckless offence for an entire match – one truly outrageous defeat of Gustavo Kuerten in Florianopolis leaps to mind – they were frankly rare even then. Now he just can't keep it up, a problem that often comes with age. Then again, Ferrer is almost the same age, and looked like he could go all day.

Even as the second set sloughed away, Ferrer could see that the Australian was close to spent. He has built a career on noting these moments, and then prolonging them until his opponents expire. The momentum shift in the third set was irresistible. Now the Spaniard was deciding how each point should proceed. By the fourth set the result was

truly foregone. And then Hewitt was gone: 6/0, a fighting bagel. I still have no idea how they're made, but I do know they take at least a decade to prepare.

David Ferrer, officially, has entered the second week.

The Momentum That Matters Most

US Open, Day Nine

(4) Ferrer d. (13) Gasquet, 7/5 7/6 6/4

Following a long day spent watching almost no tennis, thanks to the onslaught of Hurricane Isaac's weakened vanguard, determined viewers of the US Open were this evening obliged to contemplate three men's matches conducted simultaneously, but only for an hour or so. Each ended in dispirited disarray when the rain wheeled around and came back to finish the job. A couple of Serbian favourites were up an early break, while Andy Roddick and Juan Martin del Potro were embarking on a promising tiebreak. Earlier, in the drier part of the evening, a lone match had been completed.

Re-energised by an enforced break of several hours, David Ferrer and Richard Gasquet emerged for the completion of their fourth round match looking, respectively, purposeful and like a displaced hobo. Their hairstyles were a study in contrasts, as were their backhands. The match was delicately poised. Ferrer led by two sets to love, it's true, but Gasquet, if Nadia Petrova is to be believed, had the weather on his side. Things could therefore go either way. By now the belief that nothing alters momentum in a tennis match like water tumbling from the sky has established itself as uncontested orthodoxy, although some of Andy Murray's fans remain convinced that roof closure is equally as catastrophic.

Maria Sharapova later expressed a contrary view, one that was typically blunt yet resonated with the authority conferred by victory. Petrova thought Sharapova had gotten lucky with the rain. Sharapova didn't care what her countrywoman thought, since she'd won. In sport, pointing at the scoreboard often constitutes an uncounterable argument. Beyond that, however, her dismissal of Petrova's gripes reminded us that weather is a part of the sport, and that part of mastering the sport resides in one's capacity to deal with such things, unless you happen to be playing at one of those fine facilities with the wherewithal to insulate the players from the environment. The Billy Jean King National Tennis Center sadly boasts no such facility. When the US Open organisers adroitly rescheduled yesterday's night session to beat the incoming showers there was much appreciation of their quick thinking. Someone essayed the opinion that

stuffy old Wimbledon would never have done the same. The best response was that Wimbledon probably wouldn't but nor would they have to. They would point not at the scoreboard, but at the roof, which they would then close, eventually.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the person who was ahead before the rain delay (or before the roof was closed) quite often goes on to taste victory once the rain stops or the stadium seals itself hermetically. So it proved this evening. Ferrer was winning before, and then he was winning after, until he won finally, at which point he was permitted to rest. He was able to sustain his dominance through the break because it had never depended upon momentum. What we often mean when we say that the momentum changed was that one player was playing at a barely sustainable level, and that the inconvenient break in play ensured a fatal break in concentration. That is why Lukas Rosol's merciless composure in the final set against Rafael Nadal at Wimbledon was so unfathomable. He somehow continued to operate without discernible doubt even after he'd been granted the ideal opportunity to be crippled by it. If Rosol had duly collapsed, we might say that Nadal got lucky, and then move on, much as Petrova said of Sharapova.

Ferrer, however, had earlier established his lead over Gasquet by simply doing what he does well, that thing he does constantly that attracts canine metaphors like fleas. I won't go into it here, but it involves a lot of running, unrelenting pressure, and the promise to deal vigorously with any loose shots from his opponent. It is therefore easy enough to say he did nothing special, but this ignores the fact that few other guys can do it. It *is* special, even when it's not spectacular. The point is that he'd been playing fairly well within himself, even when he recovered from 3/5 in the second set, and saved a handful of set points. He had no real momentum to lose. He's just a bit better at tennis.

Gasquet, on the other hand, is a fundamentally streaky player with a proven ability to ride a wave for precisely as long as it maintains energy, but then nosedive into the sand, and be dragged back out to sea. Gasquet on a tear ranks among the better spectacles in tennis – a goes on winner *benders* – but today never much looked like being that kind of day. Faced with Ferrer at his least defatigable, it's hard to imagine the severity of the deluge that might have enabled Gasquet to turn the match around, unless you live in Bangladesh, and therefore prefer not to contemplate such things. And notwithstanding the rococo brilliance of his backhand, his forehand, ever the true barometer of his form, needed to be better. In the end it was wrapped up quickly, and without undue pomp.

By losing today, Gasquet has completed his fourth round calendar year Grand Slam (*R16CYGS*), which I can only imagine must be a pretty rare achievement. In layman's terms this means that he reached the final sixteen in all four of the Majors played in

2012, but didn't win any of those matches. This feat may be unique in the wider sport – I haven't checked – but you'd have to think that Gasquet was always the man to pull it off. His record in fourth rounds is astonishingly poor: he has reached this round fourteen times, and won precisely once. This lone victory came at Wimbledon in 2007, when he went on to reach the semifinals, but lost to Federer. In order this year, he lost easily to Ferrer in Melbourne, took a set from Murray in Paris, and took another set from Florian Mayer at Wimbledon. The loss to Mayer on grass was especially lamentable, since it denied him the excuse of a bad draw, although he was rightly dressed down for a bad effort, since it was a tactical disaster. If nothing else, his failure to progress further suggests that Gasquet's perennial ranking in the mid-teens feels about right. For an ostensibly flaky player, he takes great care to always perform to his seeding. He is, ironically, a model of consistency that way.

Conversely, by winning David Ferrer became just the second Spaniard in the Open era to reach at least the quarterfinals of every Major in a single year, the other being of course Rafael Nadal. It's a strong achievement for a guy too readily decried as a mere clay-courter. In the quarterfinal he'll play the victor of Philipp Kohlschreiber and Janko Tipsarevic, who are a good chance to complete their match sometime in the next few of weeks. Ferrer will be considered the favourite regardless of his opponent, and by winning would reach the semifinals. His quarter of the draw was patronisingly considered to be a rich opportunity for the other players in it. But Ferrer is proving, yet again, that it is mainly an opportunity for him. It's the kind of momentum that matters most.

Extraordinary Rendition

US Open, Quarterfinals

I have a colleague at my workplace – that place I periodically adjourn to in order to recover from the rigours of unremunerated tennis blather – who to my knowledge cannot enjoy a meal without first drenching it in Tabasco sauce. Admittedly I've never breakfasted with him, and therefore cannot say how he takes his porridge. But he devoutly believes that any savoury dish only benefits from the addition of Tabasco, be it pizza, souvlaki, a hamburger, fish and chips, or even a simple sandwich. I think sushi is the only hard and fast exemption from this practice, given that he smothers it instead with wasabi. But otherwise, he is adamant that it is only through the profligate application of capsaicin that a meal's potential is fully realised.

Now, instead of Tabasco, substitute famous people, and instead of food, substitute everything. You have now neatly summed up the American mainstream media's attitude

to celebrity endorsement, which is sustained by an unquenchable faith that every facet of human endeavour is instantly improved by liberally sprinkling high profile citizens atop it, with no heed paid to their relevancy or even basic competency at the task. Thus we have presidential elections in which the candidates maintain formation with any rock stars who profess support for their platform. Thus we have a US Open quarterfinal between Novak Djokovic and Juan Martin del Potro preceded by a doubles exhibition match featuring Adam Sandler and Kevin James. To be fair, this is probably no more bizarre than Will Smith rewarding Roger Federer with a framed suit in Madrid, but the rules of good taste were long ago suspended in Ion Tiriac's Magic Box.

Notwithstanding that this doubles match was in aid of a charitable cause, you'd have to wonder what, say, the Bryan Brothers made of it, having laboured away on Louis Armstrong Stadium earlier in the day. Big spirited lads that they are, perhaps they were just thrilled that men's doubles was featuring in a centre court night match. At least we now have an easy rebuttal the next time a doubles player complains they're receiving second-class treatment. In fact, we could point out that doubles is invariably the format of choice for celebrities. The ATP could use that in the marketing.

As for the match itself, it was about what you might expect, which is to say shorter and therefore preferable to watching one of Sandler or James' movies. I'd be lying if I said I haven't willingly endured an Adam Sandler film, since *Punch Drunk Love* was fine, but most of my viewing experiences have been conducted in undisclosed locations in western Latvia whilst chained to a chair and loomed over by burly men, until I cracked. Red hot pincers were on hand, but they never proved necessary. *The Waterboy* had me willing to confess to anything soon after the opening credits. I honestly haven't watched a Kevin James film, however, and therefore must admit that my determination not to is based on pure hearsay. I'll watch one when Peter Jackson agrees to film an eleven hour epic version of *The King of Queens – The Return of the King of Queens* – and not before. Only Jackson boasts the skill to sustain the palpable fantasy whereby James is married to Leah Rimini.

(4) Ferrer d. (8) Tipsarevic, 6/3 6/7 2/6 6/3 7/6

The exhibition by Sandler and James seemed especially superfluous given the superb and sinuous quarterfinal that immediately preceded it - a true epic - in which David Ferrer recovered to defeat Janko Tipsarevic in a fifth set tiebreak. This match should have been an adequate warm-up act for anyone, or even, dare I say it, entirely worthy unto itself. I believe it to be the match of the tournament so far.

Tipsarevic led by two sets to one, and then by a break in the fifth. Yet, somehow, he could never quite convince the Spaniard to stop running, no matter how stridently he made the suggestion, nor how compellingly he made the case for giving up. Even as the match entered its fifth hour, and as his opponent began to tumble wearily about the court, Ferrer never seemed to tire, thanks to a transcendent level of fitness not even John McEnroe could legitimately question.

The match was conducted in a fine sporting spirit, with the only brief moment of controversy coming well into the fifth, when Tipsarevic went over heavily on his ankle or leg, and fell to 15-40 on serve. He limped to the chair, and asked for an immediate medical timeout. The trainer appeared as if summoned via sorcery – although with Kevin James soon to take the court one imagines the medical staff were already on high alert – and commenced strapping the Serbian's strapping thigh. Upon re-emerging, Tipsarevic saved both break points, and then held aggressively, in a manner that would have had Fabio Fognini cheering and Albert Montanes rocking traumatically, assuming either man was watching. Tipsarevic's movement freed up after that, although exhaustion was clearly hobbling him somewhat, in much the same way it wasn't for Ferrer. The crowd bestowed a standing ovation upon the players at the commencement of the final set tiebreaker, giving full voice to their relief that as day-ticket holders, they weren't obliged to hang around for the 'entertainment'.

(2) Djokovic d. (7) del Potro, 6/2 7/6 6/4

By the time a wearily determined Juan Martin del Potro executed an outrageous running backhand pass in the final game of his loss to Novak Djokovic, a disappointing number of seats in Arthur Ashe Stadium were no longer occupied. I assume that most of the tickets had been sold, and at least the lower tiers had looked quite full through the early going. I also assume that the kind of person who forks out hard-earned currency to watch a tennis match – a person in many ways like me – has at least a passing interest in watching tennis, and therefore would not have assumed that the evening was only going to get worse once Sandler and James had finished causing every spectators' sides to split. Interviewed by Brad Gilbert afterwards, Djokovic pointedly thanked those who'd stuck around until the end, who'd toughed out three entire sets of very high quality tennis.

The highest quality tennis came in the tortuous 84 minute second set, in which del Potro broke immediately, and then rode that advantage almost (but not quite) all the way until the end. Djokovic broke back as the Argentine served for it. In between they ran hard and far, and hit the ball hard and often, especially on any rally lasting longer than four

shots, which usually ended when del Potro hit the ball hard and out. His best bet was to end points early, and he tellingly yielded back the break by failing to move forward behind a booming off forehand. By hanging back too often he permitted Djokovic's otherworldly defensive skills fully to flourish. The tiebreak reproduced the set in miniature, but with the intensity dialled all the way up. Del Potro found an early lead, but Djokovic finished the stronger. The point of the match, if not of the tournament, came at 5-3, as the defending champion sent his tiring opponent scurrying up and down and across the entire court *twice*, before del Potro finally made an error, then collapsed heaving onto the net. The set ended on the next point, when Djokovic redirected an excellent del Potro backhand up the line off his own backhand for the most pristine of winners. He was bellowing rather a lot by this time. So were the crowd.

From there it was unlikely that del Potro would find a way back, although he did eventually find his way back onto court after departing for an usually long time to change his sodden clothes. Upon returning he double faulted, and was broken. Djokovic didn't precisely gallop away with the victory from there, and it was only by maintaining his stratospheric level that he wasn't eventually broken back. Del Potro, to his credit, never ceased toiling, and even in the final game was well into it.

Afterwards the Argentine was effusive in praising the world No.2, dubbing him, among other things, a 'warrior'. A similar sentiment was directed towards Ferrer after his earlier match, which the ATP website imaginatively declared to be a 'war'. Djokovic will certainly be the more favoured of the two warriors in their 'battle' on Super Saturday afternoon – I hope I'm getting the hang of these military metaphors – although the matter might be decided by the prowess of their respective partners. Bowing to pressure, the USTA has decided to repurpose the event as a mixed doubles match, and the men will be joined by an as-yet unspecified quantity of Kardashians - they're typically supplied by the yard - and Matthew Perry.

An Impossible Day

US Open, Semifinal One

(3) Murray d. (6) Berdych, 5/7 6/2 6/1 7/6

It was 3/0 in the fourth set when the moment arrived, the moment that has come to feel integral to all Andy Murray victories. It is the moment when Murray's triumph feels so certain that even the British commentators let their collective guard down, loosen their belts, and whip off their cravats. Thus unbuttoned, they invariably grow breezily magnanimous, doling out praise or advice for the Scot's soon-to-be dispatched

opponent. Of course, the praise and advice both arrive groaningly laden with subtext. If praise, the message is that the opponent has performed admirably just to make it competitive. If advice, the valedictory *ostinato* of better-luck-next-time is unmistakable. In either case the message is the same: well done for showing up, but Our Andy is simply too good. The very best moment then comes when Murray is broken back, and the patronising flow temporarily dries up.

Today the opponent was Tomas Berdych, who narrowly avoided trapping himself down a double break at 0/3 in the fourth. The English voices on Eurosport graciously conceded that the Czech was 'a real fighter', which Berdych affirmed immediately by breaking back. Murray had no real cause to blame himself for this, but that has never stopped him from doing so. He'd already excoriated himself for almost every one of Berdych's winners, regularly counterpointing stern words with generalised howls and sharp blows to his own legs and head. His standards, we may be sure, are very high. On a day like today, in barely playable conditions, they were frankly unreasonable. Murray settled in for a fight. The disembodied voices describing what was happening on the screen grew slightly more pensive, and less lavish with their encouragement for Berdych.

Back at the start of the tournament I put forth the seemingly safe prediction that the 2012 US Open was unlikely to finish within its allotted two week span. I based this radical assessment upon historical precedent – there have been Monday finals for the last four years – and upon the biblically-themed hurricane that was even then reconfiguring parts of Louisiana. I then went on about it for a while. Through almost two weeks the event has boldly mocked my prediction. Threats of inclement weather came to nothing. Even Hurricane Isaac provided little assistance, as any time lost was easily recovered. All the quarterfinals were completed as scheduled. It looked as though the US Open would, at last, enjoy a Sunday final. If this was a horror film, Friday evening marked the traditional moment at which the smug protagonists would reason it was finally safe to relax their vigilance (even for a second). The tornado struck Queens in the late morning, driving lashing squalls before it. The first semifinal was delayed by an hour. With the tornado bearing down, the Billie Jean King National Tennis Centre was evacuated, and the second semifinal was abandoned, or postponed. I forget which. Either way, there will be no Sunday final. I'd had to call in a favour from God, but it was worth it.

Tennis is a lot more enjoyable in a high wind than, say, table tennis, but it still languishes a long way short of actual fun. If it rains, you simply don't play, but there is no 'wind rule' as such. After the first semifinal Mats Wilander and Barbara Schett agreed that there should be. Wilander felt that the conditions today had unfairly disfavoured

Berdych, who would otherwise have been 'sure' he would beat Murray, which seemed like an overstated case to me. In any case, it was a day for careful footwork, abbreviated backswings, low ball tosses, myriad errors, good and bad ends, and at least one tantrum. These last I have termed 'filibusters', with what I like to believe is a certain neologistic flair. Filibuster: to indulge in mid-match histrionic ranting owing to extreme wind.

Berdych's filibuster came fairly early in the first set, after Murray's hat blew off mid-point yet no hindrance penalty proved forthcoming. Pascal Maria believed that Murray's drop shot had won the point fairly, and that the dislodged cap hadn't made any difference. Berdych believed otherwise – human resources departments uselessly term this a 'difference of opinion' – and launched into a round of high-volume remonstrations that only ended when Murray sought to join in. Eventually the difference of opinion was resolved when Murray agreed to replay the point, since players are totally permitted to decide these things. The consensus among viewers was that Murray was a pretty swell guy, although I'd like to hear Ivan Lendl's thoughts, especially once his charge lost the replayed point, and was broken back. Berdych eventually broke late to take the 77 minute opening set 7/5, hitting flat and hard through the incessant breeze.

The wind provided most of the entertainment through the second and third sets, as umbrellas, drink bottles, garbage and chairs gambolled merrily about the court. Berdych's stratospheric ball toss was buffeted without mercy, and he frequently pulled out of his service motion, ducking from the ball – for some reason he rarely caught it – and glaring at it balefully. When his serve did go in he was broken almost relentlessly by Murray, whose higher-margin game was proving inherently more suited to the conditions. He made two unforced errors in the third set, to eleven from Berdych. Murray's defence, it must be said, was often spectacular.

By the time the Scot gained break points at 3/0 in the fourth set, he had won fifteen of the last eighteen games, and Berdych's righteous outrage at being compared to Lukas Rosol was coming to seem a trifle less justified. The English commentators could be forgiven for a momentary lapse into complacency. Everyone else assumed the match was essentially over. Berdych of course saved that game, and then broke back. Eventually they reached the tiebreaker. The Czech flew to an early 5-2 lead, but Murray won the next three points. Suddenly Berdych's belted forehands were careening long. Murray saved a set point at 5-6. Then Berdych saved one match point, but not a second. It ended on another forehand error. I was momentarily startled by Murray's jubilation upon achieving victory. He only barely stopped short of high-fiving the entire front row. Then I reminded myself that he had just reached another Major final – his second in a

row – and that this is kind of a big deal, for anyone. Somehow, owing to the wind and the onrushing tornado, the magnitude of the occasion had been misplaced. Saturday wasn't quite Super enough.

Watching on television, it is easy to understate how difficult such conditions are to play through, especially for two guys who hadn't once forgotten where they were.

Interviewed immediately afterwards, Murray looked exhausted: 'It was brutal. You had to focus for every single point and get yourself in the right position for every shot. The ball was sometimes stopping and moving the other way, chairs were sometimes flying on court. It was some of the toughest conditions I've ever played in, and I'm from Scotland.' After that he got to meet Sean Connery, and therefore had an ideal excuse to make small talk about the weather.

On Monday Murray will once again try to win his first Major title, from his fifth final. Presumably no one has forgotten that Lendl also lost his first four Major finals. It's a coincidence, of course, but such things still matter. The Scot will face the winner of the second final, in which David Ferrer surprisingly leads a filibustering Novak Djokovic by five games to two in the opening set. It is commonly said that wind is the great equaliser in tennis. It turns out extreme wind enables Ferrer to more than equal the reigning champion. Sadly for him, the forecast for tomorrow is for clarity and stillness. It is little wonder the Spaniard looked so uncharacteristically frustrated as the players were hustled from the court. The crowd erupted in an unsympathetic roar, before it too disintegrated and streamed for the exits, and then hurried home.

The Big Four

US Open, Final

(3) Murray d. (2) Djokovic, 7/6 7/5 2/6 3/6 6/2

In the end, and to my unalloyed surprise, the 2012 US Open did not break the record for the most recoveries from a two set deficit in Grand Slam history, despite the fact that the existing record had been equalled after only two rounds. It's always a shame when records go begging. Opinion remains evenly divided as to whether Novak Djokovic or Andy Murray should bear all or even part of the blame for this failure, since they'd combined set it all up perfectly. Disappointingly, this was not put to either man in his press conference. One might reasonably argue that there were weightier matters to discuss.

The weightiest matter, understandably, was that Murray was the first British man to win a Major title since 1936, and the first Scotsman to do so ever. English commentators, deranged with glee, have left us in no doubt which of these interpretations matters more. It was a measure of the achievement's gravity that the Sky Sports commentators, whose initially exuberant grins had hardened into rictuses as Djokovic fought back to level the match, hadn't been prepared to relax their guard even when the Scot broke again for 5/2 in the final set. Murray was essentially home and hosed, but he'd seemed that way in the second set as well, until the steady refund of a double break had left him merely hosed. (From this we may infer that when it comes to hosing, location is vital, and that hosing is a sufficiently dangerous activity that it should only be conducted within the safety and privacy of one's own house, by a certified practitioner, unless you've secured a place in a dedicated facility. To be hosed anywhere else is to risk calamity.) Murray, through four previous Major finals, had compiled a water-tight case for never getting ones hopes up. He'd already permitted a laboriously-established two set lead to fissure and crumble in the teeth of a sustained pounding by the defending champion. His chums in the Sky booth had been inured to complacency.

In each of those first two sets the Scot had led early, only to yield up his advantage with some timid play, which thus emboldened Djokovic, who nonetheless fell away uncharacteristically to concede each set. The first set tiebreaker was particularly tight. Murray finally took it on his sixth set point. It was very exciting – due partly to its length, not in spite of it – even though the tennis itself languished well shy of dashing. Djokovic came back strongly in the third and fourth sets, but again the term 'strongly' is relative. It certainly wasn't the frightening level he brought to bear on Juan Martin del Potro, or the reckless endeavour of the fourth set in last year's final.

Indeed, if I was compelled under duress to select a single word to describe the overall tenor of the match, the word I would choose is 'cautious'. Thankfully I'm allowed to use other words. The tennis was by no means poor, but it certainly wasn't great, and it certainly wasn't as great as many onlookers were insisting at the time, a forgivable lapse in the collective sense of perspective. Generously, we might term it cagey, or tactical. This quality can be attributed to the wind, which wasn't quite as savage as it had been in ruining Super Saturday, though it often wasn't far off. Many of the rallies were exceptionally long – the longest concluded at 54 shots, but feasibly could have continued forever – and were for the most part comprised of three-quarter paced rally balls directed up the middle of the court. Given that these two men are among the most nimble and able defenders the sport has ever known, this meant that winners were very rare, and took an epoch to orchestrate, even when either player felt so inclined.

However, it often seemed that the first player to really take the initiative in any given point would subsequently, not to say inevitably, lose it.

But if there was little reward for playing assertively, the long-term toll for these endlessly circumspect points was high. Both men were fated to lose their legs before this match was done with – Djokovic to cramping, and Murray to a rare but recurring virus colloquially known as ‘jelly’, as in, ‘my fucking legs feel like jelly right now!’ We now know the answer to the question of what happens when an immovable object meets an immovable object in a high wind with time to kill, although we could have guessed already that whatever the outcome it would take a near-eternity to eventuate, and that both men would nearly die in pursuing it. Murray was still limping badly as he accepted the trophy. Was I alone in hoping he’d give his leg one last clutch as he held the silverware aloft?

In any case, it wasn’t the greatest Major final in history, a statement that works on the mundane level of dramatic understatement, but also as a straight up refutation of Mark Petchey’s rapturous declaration that it had been. Undeniably there was some astonishing tennis, and some of the points were the equal of anything played in the tournament. Petchey predictably declared one to be ‘among the greatest points of all time.’ It was that kind of day, a day for English accents delivering unhinged encomiums from on high. It was fun.

It was also the day upon which any reasonable debate about the Big Four has hopefully been laid to rest, insofar as the debate was ever worth having. For one thing, Murray has now moved ahead of Nadal in the rankings, to No.3. The most persuasive argument against Murray’s inclusion among the elite was always that he hadn’t won a Major. Now he has, to go with his Olympic gold medal. He outlasted the defending champion over five sets to do it, in exceedingly adverse conditions. No one can reasonably say he didn’t earn it. Indeed, unlike his fellows at the top, he had to do it by beating a multiple Major champion, whereas Federer, Nadal and Djokovic all claimed their maiden Slam by beating other non-champions (Philippoussis, Puerta and Tsonga respectively). The coincidence whereby his coach Ivan Lendl also won his first major from his fifth final is only coming to feel more meaningful, and therefore less coincidental. As Murray was hustled through his acceptance speech – he was lucky he had no thanks to give in Spanish, since CBS had somewhere else to be – he almost goaded Lendl into a proper smile. Meanwhile Sean Connery could barely contain himself. Bagpipes blared as Murray left the court. Upper lips, hitherto starched, quivered and split into grins.

One hopes this victory will inspire others to support him outside of Britain. I sometimes wonder why he isn't more popular already, as far as I can reliably gauge such things. I realise some find his on-court antics off-putting. I personally know a few casual fans who cannot abide him for that very reason, and are surprised when I tell them that he miraculously transforms into a fairly affable human being upon leaving the tennis court. But there's also something about his tennis that people find difficult to grapple with. Simply writing Murray off as a defensive 'pusher' is misleading – for all that many seem eager to do so – although dubbing him an attacking shotmaker would be outright wrong. But, at his creative best, his play is a kind of aggression.

At its worst, it emphatically isn't. Many times today he relinquished the advantage in the rally with a wilful perversity that rivalled Tomic's, although unlike the young Australian Murray knew enough not to stick with it for long. The next point he'd maintain pressure until Djokovic buckled, and collapsed. It wasn't merely a case of variety in execution, which can be lauded, but of variety in intent, which is mostly just confusing. It has always seemed to me that Murray pays a certain price for being *sui generis* in two fields (sports and entertainment) that demand firm categories, and insist that these be assiduously conformed to. At least broadly, people like to have some idea of what to expect. I suppose it's a long way of saying Murray is an acquired taste. Hopefully more fans will now make the effort of acquiring it.

Some existing fans are blithely expecting Murray to push on and claim further Majors sooner rather than later, although he'll have to wait at least until January. The Grand Slam season has now concluded, and it seems immensely fitting that the four Majors have been won by the top four players in the world. I have no idea when that last happened, but there's a satisfying sense of symmetry to it.

The only blemish is that that record for two set recoveries at the US Open survives for another year. If only someone had thought to inform Murray of this as that fifth set got under way. He presumably would have tanked it, knowing that he could have been part of history.

Time to Sink In

The US Open's delayed Monday final, which had been widely anticipated, was due directly to a tornado that visited Queens on Saturday, but indirectly to a series of controversial decisions on the tournament's part. One of these decisions was to retain the schedule whereby both men's semifinals would be played consecutively in that vast research facility known as Arthur Ashe Stadium, which for fifty weeks a year is used to

study the effect of chaotic wind dynamics on rodents and birds. For two weeks each September, as typhoons circle impatiently in the Gulf, the researchers are permitted to use human subjects. This important function explains why the structure lacks a roof. It's science.

To my knowledge, the US Open remains the only Major in which the prize money is advertised during the trophy ceremony, perhaps in the belief that we peasants enjoy it when large sums of cash are made marginally less theoretical. Fortunately they've done away with novelty oversized cheques, since these can be used as weapons (a paper-cut from one is like being attacked with a blunt scimitar). There was also the small matter of the gripping US Open Series, which Djokovic apparently won, thereby supplementing his payout by a further half a million bucks. The Serb had the grace to smile awkwardly while this figure was read out to the crowd, who duly applauded. It's a tricky moment to navigate for a tennis player – they cannot seem too disinterested, yet nor can they imply that they toil for any reason but a noble love of competition – but Djokovic's gracious tilt of the head struck an appropriate balance.

In any case, we weren't given long to ruminate on this, since the trophy presentation lasted about 35 seconds. CBS had some vital evening programming to cut to, and weren't prepared to risk having one of the players attempt to thank their supporters in their native language. However, this did have the benefit of seriously curtailing the sponsors' speeches. One hopes the Australian Open takes a good look at this, and limits the time it grants to the CEO of Kia Motors, who after ten minutes with the microphone has barely exhausted his warm-up material. Speaking of sponsors, Murray was granted a few additional moments to parade his hastily-located Rado watch, which was later interviewed by Sky Sports.

The commentary at the US Open was about as delightful as ever, meaning it provided a solid fortnight's fuel supply for those inclined to poke fun, a habit I largely avoid. I also largely avoided ESPN, and therefore missed the combined brilliance of the McEnroe brothers, including their notorious effort in Roger Federer's opening match against Donald Young. I've heard them before, of course, and am well-accustomed to the way their inclination to disapprove contrasts and circles before eventually joining rapturously, rather like the climax of *La ci darem la mano* (Patrick is Zerlina). The network told John to rein it in. Apparently he wasn't employed to complain, which seems counter-intuitive. Meanwhile Patrick, whose interests only grew more conflicted as the Taylor Townsend story broke part, received ESPN's unequivocal backing.

Can someone please explain the commentators' unwavering fascination with serve-speed? Al Trautwig in particular could barely permit any serve to smack into the back drop before letting us know precisely how rapidly it had got there. Over on US Open Radio they had better cause to recite such details, since they lacked visuals, but they were still prone to focussing on this number to the exclusion of any other. They very quickly ran out of creative ways to mention it.

Elsewhere Frew, Mats and the Eurosport gang remained the pick of the bunch, although Barbara Schett's interviews continue to pluck at the threads of sanity. The predominantly British personnel kept their heads even as the draw slimmed down and Murray emerged as a genuine contender.

Operating under a more permissive mandate, Sky Sports didn't work the same trick. Boris Becker was presumably employed to provide some balance. The German is famous everywhere, but is notorious on Twitter for commenting on events a good day after they've transpired, so the fast turnaround of his thoughts was a pleasant change. Becker's fellow booth-jockeys informed us that he'd absconded within minutes of Murray claiming the title, since he had a high-stakes poker game to get to somewhere in Europe (I'm not making this up). The subtext, I think, was that Le Chiffre doesn't like to be kept waiting.

Match of the Tournament

I am vaguely aware that, in certain countries, publicly denying that the men's final of the 2012 US Open was the greatest match of all time can result in a midnight visit from anonymous thugs wielding lengths of pipe. Luckily for me those countries are concentrated in Great Britain, and are thus about seventeen thousand kilometres astern of my current location. My vague awareness thus doesn't have to become a painful one. I can say with some certainty that the final was the best match played that day, or even over the extended final weekend. But the best match that I saw at this US Open was the quarterfinal between David Ferrer and Janko Tipsarevic, which the Spaniard eventually won in a fifth set tiebreak.

Ferrer trailed by a break early in that fifth set, but it would have been a brave punter who backed the Serbian in from that position. Tipsarevic was tiring rapidly, which made his frantic efforts only more commendable. Unfortunately for him, Ferrer has learned the knack of deriving sustenance from his opponent's exhaustion, and thereby gaining strength. They traded desperate points, mostly but not exclusively with Tipsarevic on offence and Ferrer scurrying. Afterwards they both knew they'd been part of something special. Ferrer remarked that either man should have won, which is the kind of thing

winner is inclined to say. Tipsarevic, rightly proud of his effort even in defeat, hoped the crowd had appreciated it, and now realised that excellent tennis was possible even in a quarter that lacked a member of the big four.

Players

If nothing else, **Tomas Berdych's** run to the final of Winston-Salem the week before the US Open demonstrated that these smaller lead-up tournaments, easily written off as being inconsequential, can still serve a valuable purpose for top players short on form. This is quite aside from their usual function, which is to tire out **John Isner** or **Nicolas Almagro** for the impending Major, thereby giving everyone else a chance. Prior to arriving in North Carolina Berdych had barely strung together consecutive wins since Roland Garros. After that he was something of a juggernaut, at least in the quarterfinal against **Roger Federer**, and played commendably for parts of the semifinal in conditions that did not suit him at all. Conversely, a fetchingly stubbled **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga** reached the semifinals in Winston-Salem, but succumbed listlessly to **Martin Klizan** in the second round in New York. Klizan is playing the tennis of his life, but there are limits, especially given the Frenchman's recent heroics at Slam level. Even his disappointing exit in Melbourne was to **Kei Nishikori** in five sets.

Earlier, **Milos Raonic** approached his encounter with Murray boldly determined to prove he wasn't just an unreturnable serve, but then put in a performance that suggested he isn't even that. Murray dismantled him. I'm apparently alone in not caring that Raonic had a ready smile and cuddle for his opponent, although I confess I found his Lacoste t-shirt pretty offensive. **James Blake**, in mauling **Marcel Granollers**, reminded us why he used to mix it with the top five. He was then mauled by Raonic, who proved he can also smile amiably while dishing it out. You can't ask for more than that.

Mardy Fish narrowly avoided being smothered by a wounded **Gilles Simon**, his only lifeline the steady rhythm of Al Trautwig reciting the speed of each serve – '90mph, 93mph, 92mph . . .' – in much the same way chatting to coma-victims tenuously connects them to reality. Fish then pulled out of his fourth round against Federer. Federer denied that this walkover had anything to do with his subsequent loss to Berdych. Indeed, the world No.1 seemed at a loss to explain why it had happened at all. He just didn't play very well, and his opponent did. It happens, even to Federer. It wasn't the end of the world, even though it coincided with, and briefly eclipsed, the end of **Andy Roddick's** career. Roddick's career, which I'll discuss at length another time, ended against **Juan Martin del Potro**. The Argentine has since revealed that his

niggling wrist injury might be as bad as we'd all feared. At least it's the other wrist, but it's still a damn shame.

I've realised that this is one of those posts that could theoretically go on forever - I haven't even mentioned Isner, Kohlschreiber, Zemplja or Baker - which is generally a good cue to finish. This is therefore the part where I'd normally close with a pithy statement. Please try to think of a good one you might have read elsewhere.

Davis Cup Semifinals

A Question of Depth

World Group

Czech Republic d. Argentina, 3-2

Spain d. USA, 3-1

Spain will face the Czech Republic in the 2012 Davis Cup final, which I fervently hope is more engaging than either of this weekend's two semifinals turned out to be. It is often the case that the Davis Cup semifinals are disappointingly lopsided. Mostly this owes to the fact that most nations don't have anything like a full roster of available players, and that only for Spain is this not an issue. This deep into the tennis season, and following on so close after the US Open, there are always going to be issues with injuries, and these will almost always prove decisive one way or another.

Of the four teams competing in the semifinals this weekend, only the Czechs were at full strength, although even this is a relative assessment, given that the Czech Republic essentially fields a two man squad (I use the word 'man' here in its broadest sense, given that Radek Stepanek is a kind of sentient golem, while Tomas Berdych is lucky Rick Deckard never made it to Ostrava). These two are ably supported by a shadowy cast of extras who only ever leave the bench when dead rubbers need to be deprived of further oxygen. Today that task fell to Ivo Minar, who lost comfortably to Juan Monaco in the meaningless fifth match.

Prior to that gripping encounter, Berdych clinched the tie by defeating Carlos Berlocq in a match that was easier than those who'd say it was closer than it looked insisted. I suppose I should untangle that grammatical snarl. It was a straightforward win for Berdych, but it was the kind of win in which a gallant but over-matched player acquits himself admirably, but cannot take whatever chances he had to make it closer. There was never much danger of Berdych losing to Berlocq, unless he rediscovered the execrable form he'd shown between Roland Garros and the US Open, when he proved capable of and willing to lose to just about anyone. Admittedly he'd appeared willing enough to lose to Monaco on Friday, but had been fortunate to discover an opponent able to head him off at every turn. There were no depths to which Berdych might sink that he wouldn't discover Monaco already setting up camp. It was very demoralising for Berdych. It was a long match – somewhere over four hours – but it wasn't a very good one.

The other match played on Friday was shorter, although for Argentinean fans the ramifications turned out to be far more long-reaching. Juan Martin del Potro saw off Stepanek pretty handily, but in doing so managed seriously to injure whatever tendons were still holding his left wrist in place. He has been instructed not to use the wrist for ten days, although he'd also been advised not to play the tie at all. He has therefore entered himself into a high-stakes celebrity arm-wresting tournament for the weekend. In any case, del Potro's wrist explained Berlocq's debut in the first of the reverse singles, which in turn put the tie rather beyond doubt even in the event that Argentina snuck out a win in the doubles, which they didn't.

The USA did manage a win in the doubles, thanks to those fabulously reliable and frighteningly up-tempo Bryan twins, but that was the only rubber they could find against Spain. Again, it wasn't taxing to see how this one would play out. Isner today provided a momentary thrill by taking the first set from Ferrer, but after that he couldn't convince the Spaniard to stop breaking his serve. Sam Querrey was equally unpersuasive on the opening day. On clay, in Spain, Ferrer has so far proved to be unbeatable. But I suspect that the hosts would have won this tie even without him, and even had the American squad included Roddick and Fish, who were out for various reasons, including but not limited to retirement and an intrinsic aversion to the European mainland.

World Group Play-Offs

As is often the case, the best of the year's third weekend of Davis Cup was found in the World Group play-offs being staged at various flashpoints across the globe, and in one instance within a super-villain hideout in a hollowed-out volcano, cunningly set-dressed to look like the Rothenbaum. Roger Federer led **Switzerland** to a comfortable win over **The Netherlands**, winning both singles matches. Meanwhile **Brazil** effortlessly accounted for a spectacularly weak **Russian** team, dropping one set for the entire weekend. At least Alex Bogomolov Jr is realising his Davis Cup dream, assuming that dream is to lose dead rubbers in straight sets.

Israel travelled to **Japan**, but has since left. Whilst there it defeated the host nation, thanks mainly to Amir Weintraub, who won both of his singles matches over vastly higher ranked players (Tatsuma Ito and Go Soeda). Davis Cup brings something to Weintraub's game that he lacks in regular tournament play (his ranking has fallen back beyond the top 200). I think it would be worth his while finding out what that thing is. It would be a start. His backhand was, as ever, lovely. That could be part of it. The highlight of this tie was Kei Nishikori nursing his damaged shoulder through a five set victory over Dudi Sela to keep Japan's chances alive on the final morning. For Nishikori

the low-light was presumably when it all came to nought. For everyone else it was Soeda's questionable decision to call for the trainer while Weintraub served for the tie.

Meanwhile in Hamburg's 'Rothenbaum' a second-string **German** squad – Florian Mayer as spearhead in the absence of Philipp Kohlschreiber and Tommy Haas – saw off a full strength **Australia**. Again, these are relative terms. It is wrong to say that Australian men's tennis lacks depth at the moment, since that's really all it has. Most of its players are ranked very deep indeed. What Australia needs is someone up on the surface, making waves. Instead we had Bernard Tomic, who contrived to look all at sea, even on red dirt. He fought back well to defeat Cedrik-Marcel Stebe on the opening day, and therefore won Australia's only singles rubber. This is important to bear in mind as we get down to the business of lynching him for his supposedly lack-lustre efforts, even as we honour Lleyton Hewitt for toiling on into his twilight years.

The tie was dominated by Mayer, who was at his unorthodox best. He didn't drop a set, and for vast swathes of both his singles matches he had both Australians at his mercy, jerking and prodding their unwilling frames around the court. That leaping double-fisted backhand dropshot that he hits deserves to be named in his honour. It most certainly isn't a thing of beauty, but it is his and it is utterly effective. Nevertheless, the visitors won the doubles – Chris Guccione has a stellar record in Davis Cup doubles – and entered the final weekend with a 2-1 advantage. Tomic was rapidly outfoxed by Mayer, which allowed John Fitzgerald ample opportunity to rehearse his tone of paternal disappointment in the young Australian, which he only interrupted in order to point out that Tony Roche was doing the same more vehemently from extreme close range. Pat Rafter was having a go, too. Everyone was in Tomic's ear, but it did no good.

There was a momentary possibility that Philipp Petzschner would replace Stebe to face Hewitt in the deciding rubber, but to the consternation of the home crowd he was ruled out with injury. Then, for the second time in two years, Australia's most capped Davis Cup veteran was upset in the fifth and deciding rubber, miring his country for yet another year in the zonal play-offs. It was over in straight sets. Stebe was ecstatic. In commentary, Fitzgerald's recurring trope for this match was 'the tank', and just how little Hewitt had remaining in his, after three days of play, and fifteen years grinding away on the tour. He remarked on this so frequently that I began to suspect some sort of wager was involved. Fitzgerald served as Davis Cup captain before Rafter, and it was clear he was shattered by the loss of the tie, but also by the comprehensiveness with which Hewitt had been outplayed by Stebe, a player he would have once dispatched without trouble, on any surface. It wasn't just that Stebe had outhit Hewitt. He'd hit *through* him. The end feels close.

I switched the channel. *Downfall* was showing on another channel, hopefully by coincidence. It was a useful reminder that even worse fates can befall a country than losing a Davis Cup tie. On my computer and in Parque Roca Berdych and Berlocq were already going at it.

The Asian Swing

False Start

This, I will hazard, will be a short post about a week of firsts, and a bad day for Italian men's tennis. It is rare for me to write anything all the way through from start to finish, but I'm going to give it a go. For one thing I'm still away on holiday, and for another it might be fun. Most of my posts are composed modularly, in such a way that the parts can be flat-packed – thus saving me thousands on transport costs – and then arranged and reassembled at the end. But not today. Today I'm going to start from the beginning and see what comes out. This explains how an introduction like this one came about. Believe me it wasn't planned.

St Petersburg, Final

(3) Klizan d. (4) Fognini, 6/2 6/3

The firsts this week occurred in St Petersburg, which is has been shunted forward from its traditional position just after the Asian swing, and Metz, which has lurked in this part of the schedule for a few years. In St Petersburg Martin Klizan won his first ATP title, and became the first first-time titlist this season, and the first Slovakian to win a tour event since Dominik Hrbaty in 2004. As droughts go, it wasn't quite up there with that of the British men and their Arthurian quest never to win a Major title again – which was progressing nobly until Andy Murray wrecked everything – but it was still something, I suppose. Or so the ATP would have us believe. I personally don't recall it being a hot topic, but then I am Australian, and we have our own problems.

The most amazing thing about Klizan's victory in the final was that he had won the semifinal the round before, although my research department informs me that this is not an uncommon way to progress through a tournament draw. What is amazing was that he'd had much left after a semifinal in which he'd eventually overcome Mikhail Youzhny in three hours and 47 minutes. It was therefore the fourth longest best-of-three match ever played (assuming a non-advantage third set), and the second longest that did not involve Rafael Nadal. It was a titanic battle by almost any definition, except perhaps the literal definition featuring protagonists drawn from the Pantheon, or the more accepted one of a luxury ocean liner colliding with an iceberg thanks to Leonardo DiCaprio, thereby teaching everyone a definitive lesson in hubris. One was immediately put in mind of Chennai in 2008, when Nadal almost did himself in to deny victory to Carlos Moya, only to fold meekly to Youzhny in the final the next day. Youzhny's presence in

both instances makes the parallel seem important, but it isn't clear why. The main thing to know was that Klizan's Pyrrhic semifinal win would consign him to certain defeat in the final.

It of course didn't pan out that way, for two reasons. Firstly, due to some unholy combination of fitness and necromantic forest magic – he'd pronounced himself 'dead' after the semifinal – Klizan was as spry as a whippet in the final, darting hither and thither and gleefully teeing off on any available forehand. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, his opponent was Fabio Fognini, who just wasn't really in the mood. This was not the first time the Italian has failed to win a maiden title – he fell more valiantly to Gilles Simon in Bucharest earlier this season – and based on Sunday's example it won't be the last. It was one of those matches in which his generally winsome insouciance tips over into a less-appealing stropiness, when what *seems* to be disinterest turns out to *be* disinterest. He has a habit of giving up once he's down. Think back to the match against Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at Roland Garros, when Fognini checked out part way through the second set. In the St Petersburg final he fell quickly to 0/4 in the opening set, and that was pretty much it. He was done. The very next point he attempted a reverse tweener while running for a drop shot – that's right, while sprinting forward. Shockingly, it didn't come off. There was momentary resistance to open the second. He even broke Klizan back for 3/3. But that was it.

Klizan, in his first tour final, had every reason to be crippled by nerves, and must have been fatally enervated given his semifinal – it was titanic, you'll recall – not to mention his heroic toils in Davis Cup the weekend previous. In the end it took only sixty-nine minutes. The fifty or so people that turned out to watch must have been terribly disappointed, assuming they weren't mostly hobos in search of warmth. Klizan has now risen to No.33 in the rankings. He says his goal is to be seeded for the Australian Open. If it was staged next week, he probably would be. He was ranked No.100 less than five months ago.

Metz, Final

(1) Tsonga d. (5) Seppi, 6/1 6/2

A short while later in Metz, Tsonga took an even shorter while to see off Andreas Seppi. About fifty minutes, all told, which made it the briefest final played this season, and the shortest since Murray beat Donald Young in Bangkok a year ago. I haven't checked, but I suspect it is the first time two Italian men have lost ATP finals on the same day in less than two hours combined. More importantly, Tsonga won Metz last year, and this is therefore the first time he has ever defended a title. He did it in the most impressive

style imaginable, by aggressively reducing Seppi to the level of semi-interested onlooker.

Faced with such an onslaught, Fognini would have been justified in giving up, although he probably would have chosen this moment to fight his heart out. It wouldn't have mattered. It is rare that everything works so completely for Tsonga. His athleticism is generally a given, and his first serve and forehand are rarely less than imposing. But when his backhand is penetrating and his returns aren't missing you know you're in for a tough day if you're planning to win, or a very short one if you're Seppi. To be fair, brisk indoor courts in regional France are not Seppi's optimal operating conditions. He tried.

One gets the feeling we've arrived at a part of the season that Tsonga really likes. Unfortunately we'll now leave it again for a few weeks. Metz and St Petersburg are two weird and insignificant events lodged awkwardly between the Davis Cup semifinals and the Asian swing, a kind of aborted start to the European indoors season, like the famous false horn entry in the first movement of the *Eroica*, or something. It'd be like playing Houston and Casablanca before Indian Wells. Anyway, they are what they are – next year they might be something else – and Klizan and Tsonga won them. Of the two, St Petersburg boasts the more traditional silverware, a shortcoming Klizan sought to overcome by putting it on his head. Tsonga merely kissed the Metz trophy, since its hideousness speaks for itself.

And this is what my posts look like when I'm in a rush and just write it all down in a shoddily-dammed rivulet of semi-consciousness. Now I just need to go back and concoct an introduction that makes it look like this is what I was intending to do, and perhaps another paragraph about Fognini. And I'll work in the word 'Arthurian'.

A Certain Gallic Aplomb

The tale of the first week of the 2012 Asian Swing – 'swing' is still a term I employ only grudgingly – has been that one Frenchman won his seventh ATP title, while another still hasn't won any from seven attempts. It's the kind of coincidental symmetry that makes for a nice opening sentence, but probably reveals little beyond that. I suppose it does reinforce the more commonly-held perceptions of the men involved, and therefore rebuts those who take pride in refuting those perceptions. There's always some value in that: sometimes it's nice when truisms are true. Maybe that's a complicated point, or maybe it's just a complicated way of putting it.

Bangkok, Final

(2) Gasquet d. (4) Simon, 6/2 6/1

Richard Gasquet, who yesterday won his seventh title in a refurbished barn in Thailand, has always laboured beneath the onus of excessive national expectations. I suspect that's why his shoulders now slope so sharply downward. His story is well enough known, and among those who know it well the standard line is that all the hype was really overhype. Based on Gasquet's performances at Major (or even Masters) level, it is a hard point to refute. He was heralded as a world-beater, and by that standard he has certainly underperformed. If the world has been beaten, it wasn't by Gasquet. He has never won a Masters, and, most problematically, he has only once been past the fourth round at a Slam. Without question he has underperformed, but I'm not convinced it has been by all that much. He doesn't have much of a serve, his forehand is patchy and his remote court positioning is invariably exposed by quality opponents willing to exploit it. But, still, he *has* won seven titles, which is more than most players manage. Is the problem with Gasquet, or with poorly calibrated expectations?

Nationalism, which we call patriotism when we want to be nice about it, is useful for some things, but helping you maintain a sense of perspective isn't one of them, and it always obscures more than it reveals. In Gasquet's defence, I don't recall him declaring he'd beat the world. He isn't Bernard Tomic. The problem, partly, is that when he wins well, he wins very well. He wins so well that you find yourself wondering why he doesn't do it more often, and wishing he would. Fitness is part of the answer. Mental fortitude is another part. There are technical and tactical deficiencies, but all of these don't quite add up to a whole. I suspect this true for every player when we look close enough, that in each case we'll search vainly for that thing that makes them win or lose more than they should. But in the case of French players we look especially close, determined to uncover that common issue that has seen them claim only one Slam in the Open Era.

The cliché is that the best French male players are flashy stylists who lack sufficient substance to apply themselves through an entire Major event, and that in a crucial moment or match they will find a way to blow it. It is so obviously a generalisation and so blatantly reductive that I'm offended when it is continually proved accurate. Long-time readers are doubtless aware that I'm resistant to casual generalisation at the best of times, even as I admit that there's something seductive about a reality that conforms to our easy assumptions. But I refuse to shake the feeling that it must be more complicated than that, that the continual failure of French men to win big titles resides more in the specificity of each man and each moment than in any airy national set of characteristics. Even the idea of the typical French stylist breaks down under scrutiny.

Leconte, Pioline, Grosjean and Gasquet are all undoubtedly stylish tennis players, but if they weren't all French would we even think to connect them? Throw in Santoro and Tsonga if you like. Even Escude had his moments. Then you have Gilles Simon, who surely isn't considered a stylist even by his most ardent supporters.

Gasquet struggled all week in Bangkok, having to stage desperate and therefore uncharacteristic recoveries against Grigor Dimitrov and Jarkko Nieminen, yet he roundly trounced a sup-par Simon in the final. For some (unfathomably Gallic) reason Gasquet's head-to-head with Simon is 6-0 in his favour. It was one of those notorious days when Gasquet could do no wrong. He's already in Beijing, where he may find a way to lose dispiritedly Matthew Ebden in the first round. If that eventuates we could say that both performances were typically French. But I think it's fairer to say that both would be typically Gasquet, and leave it at that. He's won seven titles, though. That's not bad.

Kuala Lumpur, Final

(2) Monaco d. (7) Benneteau, 7/5 4/6 6/3

Julien Benneteau, if he was homicidally inclined, would surely kill for just one title. There's no telling what he'd do for seven of them. Perhaps he'd beat the world. Nothing earth-shattering was ever really expected of Benneteau, and not only by John McEnroe, who at Wimbledon proved not a whit abashed at not knowing who the Frenchman was. Even among those who have heard of Benneteau – for example anyone with a passing interest in men's tennis – there is a sense that even reaching seven finals is commendable. Of course, far worse players than Benneteau have won titles, and so I don't want to imply that he doesn't deserve one. I'd be delighted if he did. I'm just not surprised that he hasn't, and will remain unsurprised if he never does, despite the fact that I have a lot of time for him as a player.

Being likeable, he is well-liked, but he has never been held in the same lofted regard as his ostensibly more talented compatriots, such as Gasquet, Tsonga, Monfils or even Simon. But for all that I try to reject the notion of a typical French player, I have to confess that I appreciate Benneteau precisely because he doesn't seem typically French to me, except facially, and in his preference for awful Lacoste shirts. He can be imposing without being demonstrative and aggressive without being flashy. But when the pressure is greatest, or the heat turned up the highest, he is prone to losing his shape. We could say that this is a French tendency, but then we'd have to award Fernando Verdasco the *Légion d'honneur*. Really the capacity to lose form in the crucible of a tour final merely makes Benneteau a world citizen.

Benneteau was never likely to break any records, and so learning that he holds the Open Era record for most lost finals without claiming a title (seven) was a pleasant discovery. I suppose if he was ever to insinuate himself into the history books, I think that was a reasonable accolade to aim for – difficult and obscure, yet achievable, despite a genuine risk that he'd beat Nieminen in a low-grade decider in Sydney earlier this year. (The Finn's record in finals is nearly as poor as Benneteau's.) Yesterday in Kuala Lumpur against a handsomely shorn Juan Monaco there was also some danger that the record might slip away – especially since Benneteau had been so marvellous in beating David Ferrer in the semifinals – but fading fitness and a surging opponent did for him in the end.

Indeed, it was nice to see this pair battling it out in a decent final in Malaysia, given the last time they'd been mentioned in the same space was when they'd been stretchered from the Monte Carlo centre court, each having injudiciously trod in a cunningly concealed pothole. That was many months ago, and they've had their individual moments since, in what has amounted to a career year for both. Monaco has won four titles. Benneteau, by continuing to win none, may well have secured his place in history.

The Red and The Blue

Beijing and Tokyo, Quarterfinals

Perhaps it's just me, but I find it helpful that the Japanese and Chinese Opens are colour-coded. This enables those of us with multiple streams open to tell at a glance which city the action is taking place in. For the record, Tokyo is red and Beijing is blue, although the latter tennis centre, according to the official line, is green all the way.

Both events are staged in impressive and imposing facilities with vast central stadia worthy of hosting a Major final. Even respectable crowds are apt to get swallowed up, no matter how lustily they cheer, or how often they gasp at every single last dead netcord. Both facilities feature hectares of space around and behind the actual court, which some players find off-putting. It can be dispiriting when first serves that normally slam into the backdrop are now bouncing twice before they reach it. In the Beijing Olympic Green Tennis Centre the show-courts have been given evocative titles like Diamond Court, Lotus Court, Moon Court, and Court 1. At Tokyo's modestly titled Ariake Colosseum they've opted for more traditional names. The centre court is called Center Court.

(8) Nishikori d. (2) Berdych, 7/5 6/4

Tokyo's Center Court is the only court Kei Nishikori is likely to play on for the immediate future. As Japan's highest ever ranked male player (by some margin), he features heavily in the promotional material for the local shindig. His nation is justifiably proud of his achievements, and certainly even more so now that he has upset Tomas Berdych to reach the semifinals with a quite wonderful display of aggressive hitting. Berdych was the defending champion at the blue tournament, but this year made the switch to red. One assumes a hefty appearance fee facilitated this decision, which the organisers might have regretted had the Czech not lost to the local favourite. David Ferrer, on the other hand, had switched from red to blue, but then withdrew in the first round against Yen-Hsun Lu. There was presumably a decent amount of money abetting that decision as well. Not all investments pay off. Indeed, the way the players tend to switch between the two tournaments from year to year is part of what makes them blend into each other, thus making the colour-coding useful. Anyway, Nishikori will play Marcos Baghdatis in the semifinal, which is not only winnable, but eminently so. Local hopes are high.

(1) Murray d. (7) Wawrinka, 6/2 3/6 6/2

There was never much doubt that Andy Murray would return to Tokyo to defend that title he took so completely last year, when he (eventually) dealt Rafael Nadal the most consummate of hidings, allowing the Spaniard just four points in the final set. Curiosity in Murray is intense, given that this is his first tournament since winning the US Open last month. There seems to be a prevailing expectation that his game would have changed somehow, that winning that maiden Slam was deeply transfigurative. It's an expectation I don't have much time for, and Murray thankfully seems unaltered. The commentators, however, could barely keep the wonder from their voices that the Scot's second serve is still his weakest stroke, and that Stan Wawrinka was merciless in going after it. *But, but . . . everything was supposed to be different now.* It allowed the Swiss to grab a set. In the overwrought parlance of the times, this means that Murray was given a 'scare', the implication being that dropping a set propels any of the top four into a blind funk. Earlier in the week, in blue Beijing, Novak Djokovic was reduced to a quivering panic by Michael Berrer, though he somehow got through in the end.

Vying with 'scare' for the status of most over-used summary term is 'eased', as in Janko Tipsarevic eased by Gilles Simon. Aside from how often it is used, there is also some confusion over precisely what it means. Sometimes it is applied to a quick and simple 6/2 6/1 type thrashing, in which case I suppose it just means 'easy'. At other times it

seems to be synonymous with 'gingerly' or 'carefully', as in: 'With the foal in breech position, the farmer eased his callused hands into his prized mare's birth canal.'

(3) Tsonga d. Youzhny, 6/3 6/3

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga therefore eased past Mikhail Youzhny in the former sense, which was a shame for those of us hoping for a more protracted and dramatic affair. Through its initial going, to 3/3 in the first set, this match had the potential to become a classic, though after that it mainly served as a warning against getting your hopes up. Tsonga was snatching at his backhand, and Youzhny was ripping his, prompting Robbie Koenig in commentary to yodel an extended hymn in praise for that stroke. He said it was the hardest backhand he'd ever faced. With pleasant simultaneity, Wawrinka was even at this moment sacrificing Murray to the Lord of Eternal Terror by taking the second set. For aficionados of one-handed backhands, it was an embarrassment of pleasures. Even Tsonga got in on the act, removing his left hand on a few passing shots. The tennis was wonderfully all-court, but from the middle of the first set it was also all Tsonga. He was typically athletic, and impenetrable on serve, meaning the Russian had no way back when the odd horrible game saw him broken. His beard is looking very fine, though, even if it hasn't quite regained the impressive volume and density of the season's early going. In Zagreb there were unsubstantiated reports of local children going missing in it.

(6) Raonic d. (3) Tipsarevic, 6/7 6/2 7/6

Back on the red court, and several hours earlier, Milos Raonic called on his samurai experience – and those, depressingly, are his words – to 'ease past' Tipsarevic in a third set tiebreaker. This was 'easing' in the second sense, although I suppose there's nothing gentle or circumspect about the Canadian's serve. It is careful in much the same way that performing a non-anaesthetised root canal with a pick-axe is. He saved a match point, but it was on his own serve, so it doesn't really count. Tipsarevic then did the same. Then Raonic had had enough, and ripped an enormous backhand winner down the line, the equivalent of reaching in with both hands and yanking the foal out in one go. I have it on good authority that this almost never works. But it did, and Raonic predictably served it out with an ace. He'll play the vestigially-terrified Murray in the semifinals. Easy.

An Adoring Roar

Tokyo, Final

(8) Nishikori d. (6) Raonic, 7/6 3/6 6/0

Kei Nishikori defeated Milos Raonic in the final of the Rakuten Japan Open Tennis Championships, thereby becoming the first Japanese man to do so in the tournament's four decade history. I cannot imagine that anyone seriously disputed Nishikori's status as Japan's greatest ever male tennis player, but if they did, I assume they don't now. It seems beyond reasonable quibble. Indeed, it was a pretty good afternoon for Japanese sports in general. Only an hour earlier Kamui Kobayashi achieved his first podium finish at Suzuka, narrowly edging out Jensen Button for third. With patriotic euphoria in the air, the capacity crowd in Tokyo's Ariake Colosseum was perfectly justified in roaring their approval the precise moment Raonic's last forehand drive volley found the net. Suddenly, there was noise.

The idea of preternatural Japanese politeness is of course a cliché, but it is one that is tethered firmly enough to reality. During the last game of today's final Nishikori was pushed wide to his forehand, whereupon he went for broke on a winner down the line. It was initially hard to tell if the ball was in or out, and, with no clear outcome to react to, the crowd went instantly and eerily silent as they anxiously awaited the outcome of the inevitable challenge. The outcome was that Nishikori's forehand had found the exact corner, and the colosseum erupted. To undisciplined Western ears, it almost sounded rehearsed in its precision, even though I don't question the spontaneity.

Given the afternoon's prevailing vibe of well-drilled inevitability, the fact that the final was delayed by some minutes seemed almost calamitous. Firstly it was raining, which meant the doubles final had to be played indoors. Then it stopped raining, which prompted the tournament organisers to retract the roof – Wimbledon take note – although this encountered problems when the roof gave it up as a bad lot part way through. The gabbing faces on Sky Sports were forced to kill time, and typically sought to do it as painfully as possible. There was some leaden-fisted banter about the Japanese ironically being masters of technology – 'har har' – since any nation capable of building the *shinkansen* should apparently be immune to mechanical failure. They also essayed some confident predictions regarding Raonic's likely victory. These predictions were hard to argue with at the time – although it's surprisingly easy now that he has lost – given he'd beaten Andy Murray only twenty-four hours earlier.

As it happened, Raonic's defeat of Murray only twenty-four hours earlier, and of Janko Tipsarevic just a day before that, did prove decisive in its way. Both those matches had gone to third set tiebreakers, and required that match points be saved. This had exacted a physical and mental cost. As the final's last set spiralled rapidly beyond his grasp, it was little wonder he began to grow ragged. This is not to imply that he would have won had he been fresh, since Nishikori was by this stage playing with a reckless virtuosity that at times lifted to unplayable levels, but I doubt whether a fresher Raonic would have been bagelled.

He had been broken only once in the tournament before the final, by Murray, but he was broken without relent by the end. Nishikori was now reading Raonic's monstrous serve well. 'Body' serves that almost decapitated him in the first set were now reflexed back into play, but fewer of them were finding the service box. Kick serves to the ad-court that would have earlier dragged Nishikori into the crowd lost a little of their bite. The Japanese man still had to leap for them, but not quite so far.

If Raonic's final ended enervatingly, then it began nervously. He was broken in his opening service game, from 40-0 up. It set a pattern early, which was that Nishikori would return almost anything he could lay a racquet on, and that if any point thereafter attained a neutral state, he would likely go on to win it. There was an early scare when the trainer and tournament doctor appeared on court to administer to Nishikori, who had sustained some corneal trauma from looking too closely at Raonic's Lacoste ensemble. A less-disciplined crowd might have groaned from consternation, but not this one. He was pronounced fit to continue, whereupon he was broken back. The locals remained mostly composed even then, and when Nishikori went down 0-3 in the eventual tiebreaker.

I suppose they were right to be confident. Nishikori came back to take it, on his fourth or fifth set point. Then Raonic took the second, convincingly. But then Nishikori took the third, in the most convincing manner possible. It is the second year in a row that a three-set Tokyo final has ended in a blowout, a meaningless coincidence that only seems more coincidental by the consideration that either blowout, on paper, was supremely unlikely. It is Nishikori's first 500 level title, from his second attempt (he lost to Federer in Basel last year), while Raonic falls to 0-3 in finals at this level. Well beyond that status afforded it by the ATP, however, is that fact that it is a richly-pedigreed and very prestigious tournament in its own right. And beyond that is the fact that it is Tokyo, and that no Japanese man had ever won it before. David Ferrer has remarked that winning Barcelona, a similarly-rated tournament in his home country, would mean the world to him. For Kei Nishikori, that must have been exactly how it felt in that moment, as fifteen

thousand of his staunchest compatriots rained down an adoring roar that was, finally, unrestrained.

Beneath Stylised Blades

Shanghai Masters, Third Round

Viewed from the outside, the main court at the Qi Zhong Tennis Centre in Shanghai bears an uncanny resemblance to a sports stadium mimicking a lotus flower. Viewed from within, the floral implications are less overt, especially when the roof irises shut to form a sinuously menacing mosaic. It looks more like the stylised blade of gigantic food processor, or part of the machine city from the third *Matrix* film, either of which must be relaxing to play tennis under. Unlike Hamburg's Rothenbaum, over which the retractable sails seem liable to billow away given a sufficiently cataclysmic zephyr, the closed roof of Qi Zhong's centre court makes its immense weight apparent in a display of engineering bravura. If, heaven forbid, the roof was to collapse, the victims would at least perish knowing they were crushed by science. Just how many victims there would be is another question.

Lower down, and the seating betrays a more European influence in the expensive sections adjacent to the court. Many Continental tennis arenas contrive to look half-empty even when they're rambunctiously full, by the cunning placement of low hoardings between each row (Philippe Chatrier), or by barricading off discrete little sections (the Caja Magica). As one glances quickly over the crowd, the resident biomass is visually broken up by lines of colour in a way similar to rows of empty seats. Elsewhere, lacking the funds or wherewithal to pull this off, they work a similar trick by simply not having anyone show up, like in St Petersburg. Shanghai has pursued this solution for the **outside courts**, with considerable success. If tennis is booming in China, why aren't more people turning up to see it?

They've at least been turning up for the last few night sessions, mostly because that's when **Roger Federer** has been scheduled to play. Even those who know nothing about tennis know about him. I know people who couldn't pick Rod Laver out of a police line-up, yet whose bucket lists include seeing Federer play, right there between swimming with dolphins, reading *War and Peace*, and other clichéd shit. However, on Wednesday night Federer played Taipei's **Yen-Hsun Lu**, and was therefore faced with the unusual situation of not being the crowd's clear favourite. This was hardly a unique event, however, even though some commentators apparently believed his legendary equanimity might be irreparably shattered. But he has played Nadal in Madrid, and

Hewitt in Melbourne, and Murray in London, and it wasn't as though the crowd was actually hostile. They were mostly pleased that Lu gave a decent account of himself, and proved more than happy to see the world No.1 get through in straight sets.

The crowd – although I should stress that it was probably a different crowd composed mostly of different people – was rather more excited last night when Federer narrowly survived against an initially inspired **Stan Wawrinka**. Having narrowly survived, he then set about flourishing as his compatriot – the Swiss who loses – fell in a sorry heap. The upshot of this victory is that Federer will now certainly retain his top ranking for yet another week, and that this will be his 300th such week at the top. Federer had remarked before the match that 300 doesn't really mean that much more than 299. Jason Goodall and Doug Adler debated the *truthiness* of this statement on air, with the result being, I think, that 300 is a more important number to Doug Adler.

If much of professional tennis is being conducted in new soulless arenas, it is also being energised by old soulful men. Federer, as we all know, is 31. **Radek Stepanek** is even older at 33, and he has now defeated a couple of top 15 twenty-somethings in **Richard Gasquet** and **John Isner** to reach the quarterfinals. In the opening round he also saw off **Lleyton Hewitt**, although the Australian veteran is truly more machine now than man. Stepanek is more gargoyle than man, and can dress like a lost dare from the eighties, but when he's on he still brings an attractively attacking game, and doesn't seem to have slowed particularly in his advancing years. Stepanek, as is the way of things, has turned increasingly to doubles of late, but he remains a force when on his own. He has found form seemingly at the right time, with the Davis Cup final looming in the middle distance, where he will almost certainly be required every day. It's worth remembering that Stepanek once won a Davis Cup singles rubber in which his opponent Ivo Karlovic served the then-record number of aces for a match. That record is now held by Isner, and yesterday Stepanek withstood his monstrous serve with apparent ease. Once the ball was back in play, the Czech was almost embarrassingly superior.

Tommy Haas is even older than Stepanek, and by thrashing **Janko Tipsarevic** last night ensured he will return to the top twenty for the first time in over two years. Actually, a thrashing wasn't technically required – the rankings don't work that way and a mere beating would have sufficed – but Haas was in a stern mood. Tipsarevic, it should be said, didn't seem in a particularly competitive mood, and some of the many breaks were conceded quite perfunctorily with an easy recourse to the double-fault worthy of **Fernando Verdasco**. It wasn't quite the fight fans might expect from the world No.9, although his staunchness in the face of German aggression still looked Churchillian compared to **Bernard Tomic's**. Upon winning Haas delivered a strangely non-erotic and

very slow pelvic thrust, although I couldn't say which of the few dozen people in the stands it was intended for. Most of these formed into a knot behind the player's chairs, and began loudly and aggressively demanding that 'Tommy' sign their belongings.

With this victory Haas moved to 499 career wins on tour. To reach 500 he'll need to beat **Novak Djokovic** today (or I suppose somebody else some other time). Less likely things have happened, although I'd need to Google them. Djokovic has been in excellent form these last few weeks, and although he has had issues with Haas in the past, they were mostly a long time ago and mostly on grass, notwithstanding their terrific dust-up in Toronto a few months back. But this Shanghai court is grippy and slow and abets a sturdy defence, and there is none sturdier than the Serb's. Nonetheless, even reaching the quarterfinals of a Masters events, and returning to the top twenty, constitutes a marvellous effort for Haas. Just 16 months ago he wasn't even ranked. Now he's back in the top twenty, and he didn't get there by being merely satisfied with marvellous efforts.

I haven't even mentioned **Andy Murray, Marin Cilic, Tomas Berdych** or **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga**. Consider them mentioned.

Weaponised Insincerity

Shanghai Masters, Final

(2) Djokovic d. (3) Murray, 5/7 7/6 6/3

'Let's use our cameras to capture this moment!'

The manic and skittishly bilingual trophy presentation is always a highlight of the Shanghai Masters 1000, propelled at break-neck pace by an off-camera compere who would, in a different context, qualify as the world's most tiresome dinner-guest. He demonstrated how insincerity might sound were it to be weaponised, delivering curiously-nuanced stock-phrases with a velocity and intensity that was exhausting even from afar. Andy Murray, when he was invited to speak – 'Is this thing *on*?' – mostly looked bemused. It was better than he might have looked, given he'd just lost a quite phenomenal final to Novak Djokovic. As two-time defending champion, and with the wreckage of five blown match points and two tennis racquets littering the court around him, he might have looked heartbroken.

Contrary to the fervent hopes of the ATP, high-quality Masters finals were never that common, but in recent seasons they have grown very rare indeed. This year I can only recall Madrid – much maligned Madrid – providing a suitably exciting finale. It was

therefore a special treat indeed that Shanghai's final rose fully to its potential, rather than merely sinking to our expectations. Through its short history, this event has taught us not to expect much. Hopefully that has changed, not merely because of this match, but because of the fine efforts that have shaped the week, especially Tommy Haas' and Radek Stepanek's runs to the quarterfinals. Honestly, though, this match is the one destined to endure in the memory.

The final commenced at a pace sufficiently cracking to impress even the evening's compere, and at a standard sufficient to leave everyone else breathless, except for the crowd, who were merely rendered voiceless from screaming themselves hoarse. It has suddenly become fashionable to talk up the 'rivalry' between Djokovic and Murray, but until now I'd remained sceptical that it would amount to all that much, no matter how often they run afoul of each other in the years to come. Before last year they hadn't played each other very much at all, thanks largely to the perennial third and fourth seedings which saw them marooned in opposite sides of every draw. This year they've played each other quite a lot, but most of the matches came to little. The Australian Open semifinal was a fine encounter. But I submit that I'm not alone in believing that the US Open final was, for all its high drama and epoch-fracturing significance, not a particularly great match, owing in no small part to the weather, which was deplorable. Today in Shanghai the standard was much, much higher. The conditions were perfect, but beyond that it was a question of intent.

My main reservation with this match-up is that both Djokovic and Murray are inherently defensive. When neither is willing to attack the points can grow astonishingly long, but only very occasionally interesting, and usually then only in the last few strokes. Tonight it was mentioned, with a misplaced tone of wonder that the US Open final had featured over 90 rallies of ten strokes or more, as though that was an intrinsically fabulous thing. I remember the match pretty well, and I vaguely remember the 75th ten-stroke rally feeling wearily similar to the 65th, and wishing that they'd just get on with it. The problem is that one of them must lead, or it merely becomes a battle of the legs, played out over an eternity. There's always going to be a problem when two immovable objects collide.

Tomas Berdych had discovered just how immovable Djokovic was in the semifinal yesterday: 'I like to play quite aggressive, and makes the others run. But this doesn't hurt him that much.' Meanwhile Murray had faced down a pair of attacking seniors in Radek Stepanek and Roger Federer, and thus had similar incentive to hone his defensive skills to a fine point. But the shift came in his semifinal against Federer, when Murray emerged determined to match the world No.1's aggression. Especially on return, he was

fearsome. Indeed, from the end of the first set there was almost nowhere for Federer to place a second serve that wouldn't see it belted dismissively away into a corner. This turned out to be an ongoing concern for a guy like Federer who normally defends his second delivery so well, and who'd already broken himself with an anxious trio of double faults. Kickers, sliders, body-serves – they were all dealt with.

Murray began today's final similarly inclined, but if there's one thing Djokovic does well – there are in truth *dozens* of things he does well – it is to lift his intensity when pressed. The result, almost immediately, was that holding serve became nearly impossible for either man, and that the rallies were conducted at a phenomenal pace. The first set was composed of endless highlights, one of which was Djokovic taking some time to extravagantly destroy his racquet upon pushing a volley wide to be broken for 5/6, giving it four lusty blows on the surface and creatively incorporating a half-pirouette. He is a great mover. The rest of the highlights involved tennis. Murray served it out for 7/5.

Relentless breaks gave way to a tightening pattern of holds in the second set, which only served to ratchet up the tension to the point where several crowd members exploded and had to be removed by emergency services. Murray broke through in the seventh game for 4/3. Soon after that he stepped up to serve for his third successive Shanghai title. He moved to 30-0, quickly by the standards of the day. Robbie Koenig insisted on air and on Twitter that the next point was the one upon which the final truly hinged, a scrambling and urgent all-court skirmish that Djokovic finally took with a tweener and drop shot. 'Oh, stop it!' he blurted once it was over. But I'm not entirely convinced that the match turned there, since that merely brought it to 30-15 in Murray's favour, and the Scot achieved his first championship point soon after.

I can concede that the Djokovic that raised his fist and smiled after that point was a dangerously familiar sight, however. It was the reckless and complicated gallows smile he saves for when he has almost given up on winning, and begins to play like there's nothing left to do but have fun. It was the smile of last year's US Open semifinal, and this year's Roland Garros quarterfinal. But it's not as though the Serb galloped away with the match from there. He saved a match point in that game before eventually breaking back. The subsequent tiebreaker was a minor classic within the larger one, and more crowd-members succumbed. Another four match points came and went, and a clutch of set points. Eventually Djokovic took it 13-11 on a forehand drive volley. Murray's racquet was also removed by emergency services, but proved on diagnose to be inoperable.

As it progressed, the final set became a question of movement, in particular of Murray's movement. At the best of times he relishes nothing more than groping awkwardly and

constantly at his thighs – I expect he does it in his sleep, though I lack the means to confirm it – but now he appeared to have reasonable cause. He hobbled during points rather than merely after them, and his second serve lost its bite. It would be vague rather than inaccurate to say that Djokovic sensed this. He certainly saw it, and began to press on his returns, finding outright winners that Murray merely stumbled towards, if that. As had happened all day, the break came in the seventh game, and it seemed clear that it was decisive. Murray was now obviously shortening the points, which was the right thing to do in the circumstances. He just wasn't winning enough of them. Boldness saved a couple of match points, but not a third. Murray's final backhand landed long and Djokovic had won his third Masters title for 2012.

Afterwards both men endured a procession of hastily-named dignitaries and hastily-bestowed gifts, which included the trophies and a new Rolex for Djokovic. All of this took up about two minutes, narrated in double-quick Mandarin and unctuous English. After that Djokovic and Murray were commanded in no uncertain terms to pose for photos, no wait, move slightly, more photos. Only when every last camera in the Qizhong Forest Sports City Arena had captured the moment were the players invited to speak. They did, but sounded comparatively diffident, and had little to add. And like that the Shanghai Masters and the Asian Swing was over for another year.

The European Indoors

Champion of Everything

Novak Djokovic will almost certainly finish 2012 as the No.1 ranked player in the world, or in the diffident parlance of the ATP's marketing department, the ATP World Tour Champion. With only three weeks of the regular season left to play, he holds a race lead of 2,155 points over reigning world No.1 – but not reigning World Tour Champion – Roger Federer. In order for Federer to overtake Djokovic, he would need to win every remaining event into which he is currently entered, including Basel, the Paris Indoors and the World Tour Finals in London. Based on recent history, there's no compelling reason to suppose Federer won't win all of those. He did it last year, and almost managed it the year before. However, even if Federer once again cleans up indoors, Djokovic, by winning the Shanghai Masters, has ensured himself a reasonable shot at being crowned ATP World Tour Champion anyway. He only needs 846 points to put it beyond doubt. The real question, for me, is whether this accolade is really as important as its grandiose title avers.

I've never found it to be especially important, and, as shaky as my memory might be, I don't recall ever hearing it mentioned at all through my first dozen years of following the sport. The first time I can really remember it being paraded as a noteworthy achievement unto itself was in 1998, when someone reminded us that Jimmy Connors had contrived to end the year as the No.1 ranked player no fewer than five times, and that Pete Sampras now had a decent chance to surpass this. Suddenly it turned out that year-end No.1 mattered.

The tale of Sampras' quest has grown in the telling, with the prevailing mythology holding that in order to ensure he finished ahead of Marcello Rios that year he entered himself into any event he could find, no matter how obscure. It has been elevated to the status of a grimly heroic death-march. It's true that once Sampras recovered from the injury he'd sustained at the US Open he played every single week, but the tournaments weren't *that* out-of-way: Stockholm, Vienna, Masters events in Stuttgart and Paris. Mostly they were played on very fast carpet surfaces, which with Sampras' serve meant that even the diciest matches turned out comparatively short by today's standards. The pick of those matches, incidentally, was his loss to Richard Krajicek in the Stuttgart semifinals.

It's probably worth mentioning that Sampras also sported a goatee through this period, possibly as a direct challenge to Rios, who usually had him covered when it came to

facial hair. It is perhaps the only time that the world No.1 ranking has been fought over by bearded men. As it happened, Rios got injured and Sampras coasted over the line to become the only man to finish the season as No.1 six times. The fact that he did it six times in a row is a record that will presumably endure for some years yet. If Federer somehow manages to hold off Djokovic this year he will equal the total number of years, but they haven't been consecutive. There have been gaps, which I will come to.

Fast forward a couple of years, to 2000, and the ATP has revamped the tour (you'll note I've switched to a more urgent present tense). There is the New Balls Please campaign, and the Super Nine series has been rebranded as the Masters Series. The venerable 52 week rolling Entry System, which determines the actual rankings and is necessary to work out who gets into any given tournament, is deemed too esoteric for the average fan, and is nudged aside to make way for the more simplistic Champion's Race. All players begin each year at zero points, and accumulate them as the year goes on. By the season's conclusion, Gustavo Kuerten accumulates slightly more points than Marat Safin in the final match of the year, defeating Andre Agassi in the final of the Tennis Masters Cup in Lisbon before an adoring partisan crowd. At a single stroke he seemingly vindicates both the Race and the New Balls campaign. For the ATP, it is a tremendous coup.

It was also a tremendous coincidence. Finishing the year at No.1 means that you have accumulated more points than anyone else over the previous year, but then so does the Entry System. The rankings already function on a rolling 52 week system, and anyone who achieves the No.1 ranking at any time has done so based on a full year's worth of results. In the simplest sense, the man who finishes No.1 is the one who just happens to have the top ranking in the week the season ends. It's a rare and special achievement, but, I would argue, no more rare or special than holding the No.1 ranking in May or February. Given that the tour then enjoys an all-too-brief rest period, the putative World Tour Champion also enjoys the added perk of retaining that ranking uncontested for a month or so, but that's about the only tangible difference. The tennis season isn't really like those of other sports. It has a shape, but no momentum to the end, and you could just as easily say that it begins with the US hardcourts in July, and ends with Wimbledon. It would make little difference.

In any case, the calendar season following Kuerten's glorious moment commenced, as they all do, with the Australian Open. This was won by Agassi, who defeated Arnaud Clement in the final. Reigning World Champion Kuerten bombed out in an early round, which was his usual tactic in Melbourne. Agassi therefore moved to the top of the Race, and Clement to second. Clement retained this position for months. Each week the ATP's

television program would announce the Race standings – *with no mention of the actual rankings* – with Clement in second spot, notwithstanding that his actual ranking had only moved up to No.12 (he eventually made it to No.10). It became glaringly obvious that the Race was quite irrelevant as a metric of anything until much later in the season, which is to say once the Race standings grew closer to those of the Entry System. This explains why the Race has largely been abandoned and now only returns as an item of interest later in the season, when the ATP website starts trumpeting the Race to London, meaning qualification for the Tour Finals. The Entry System has long since returned to primacy as the most reliable means of ranking players.

In 2009 Federer became the first man since Ivan Lendl to regain the year end No.1 ranking, which I strongly suspect was as much news to Lendl as it was to me. It was talked up at the time, but seemed pretty abstruse even by the standards of Federer's collection of records, some of which are obscure to the point of perversity. Upon hearing it, I wondered if I'd heard right. At first I thought they were saying he was the first player since Lendl to regain the No.1 ranking. This was obviously wrong, of course, but had it not been it would have been well-worth a comment. But it was merely as stated. He was once more World Tour Champion – the term is as tiresome to write as to consider – having relinquished it to Rafael Nadal the year before. I should note that Nadal in turn achieved the same feat in 2010. But I maintain that merely getting back to No.1 at all is the real achievement, regardless of the date at which you happen to do it. If Federer ends this year as No.1, he'll become the only man to regain the allegedly coveted title of World Tour Champion twice. I'm not convinced that is precisely the accolade he is striving for, having recently become the only man to reach 300 weeks as world No.1, a record that surely means far more.

Nonetheless, Federer apparently disagrees with me on at least one level, although he thankfully hasn't come out and chastised me publicly. He clearly feels the World Tour Champion title is worth pursuing, although I'd venture that his continued toils owe as much to not wanting to give up the top ranking at all. I can't imagine he played Shanghai merely to please Rolex, especially with death-threats adding unneeded spice. He has announced that he will indeed be defending his title at the Paris Indoors, despite a widespread assumption that he'd give it a miss this year. He needs those points. Djokovic, on the other hand, needs fewer points to make it certain, and isn't playing until Bercy. If he wins it, he'll gain 1,000 points, and be declared the champion of the year. If he doesn't, the Tour Finals will gain some added excitement. I suppose that isn't a bad thing.

The Blue Shift

Stockholm, Second Round

The news came in last night (over the wire) that Australia has secured a non-permanent place on the United Nations Security Council. For months we have been warned by a succession of government ministers that this was unlikely to come to pass, given that Australia had entered the race relatively late in proceedings, while our main competition – Luxembourg and Finland – had been lobbying vigorously for the better part of a decade. There were only two 'available' seats, and Luxembourg secured one. Australia took the other from the fancied Finns. This occurred just days after **Lleyton Hewitt** defeated **Jarkko Nieminen** at the If Stockholm Open. Australian-Finnish relations have consequently attained an all-time low. There's talk of invasion. Now that we're on the Security Council, I assume we have that kind of power.

(Actually, while it has generally been assumed that securing this seat is an incontrovertibly good thing, and it probably is, now that it has actually happened people are wondering why this might be so. Meanwhile those prone to wringing their hands have commenced wringing. One local radio commentator queried how we can presume to pontificate on the world stage without having our own house in order, thus betraying a stunning misunderstanding of what the Security Council is, given that it counts China, the USA and Russia among its permanent members.)

Stockholm numbers among my favourite 250 level tournaments. Along with Basel's sadly missed confected pink courts, Stockholm seems quintessentially of the European Indoors. But if Basel's new blue is generic, and an unneeded concession to London's O2 Arena, Stockholm's old blue is pervasive and oddly gloomy, as though the powerful floodlighting hasn't alleviated the darkness so much as tinted it. From my remote Australian vantage, even the air looks saturated by it, as though the action is occurring underwater, or very far away but hurtling towards me, like the advance guard of Finland's ground assault. It also has a trophy that looks like a doomsday device. You cannot get more European Indoors than that.

The second seed in Sweden this week is **Tomas Berdych**, who two weeks ago sought to defend his Beijing title in Tokyo. The top seed is **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga**, who is working a similar trick by endeavouring to defend his Vienna title in Stockholm. Stockholm's defending champion is **Gael Monfils**, but he isn't playing anywhere any more, having lost in the first round. He has already committed the remainder of the season to convalescence. He'll be back in the New Year, presumably as exciting, fragile and infuriating as ever. Anyway, the top two seeds are still there, and are 'easing through'

the draw with a minimum of fuss. I'm especially looking forward to Berdych's next match against **Mikhail Youzhny**, even if the latter has defied my advice by shaving his beard off again.

Otherwise today **Marcos Baghdatis** 'eased past' **Alejandro Falla** in only nine games, for the loss of none. The Columbian was injured, and wasn't playing especially well even before he stopped playing entirely halfway through the second set. Straight after that **Sergei Stakhovsky** 'eased past' **Feliciano Lopez** – who looked strikingly misplaced in the luridly azure gloom – in a couple of tight sets. I still haven't worked out precisely what 'eased' means, so I'm going to apply it to nearly everything just to be sure. From what I can tell, this is only the second time Stakhovsky has eased past the second round at tour level this season. Now that he has reached a quarterfinal, he might be interested to discover that his prize money will go up. He'll certainly be interested to discover that he's playing Tsonga.

Vienna, Second Round

Meanwhile in Austria, in the timeless Vienna that Tsonga abandoned, **Tommy Haas** has become just the fourth active player to reach 500 wins on the ATP Tour. The other three are Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and former Young Australian of the Year Lleyton Hewitt, who will command his nation's military forces for the coming Finnish campaign. Haas is the 38th man to reach this milestone in the Open Era. I won't list all the others, but you can have a go if you like. Perhaps turn it into a parlour game.

The tournament gifted Haas a Fiat 500 to commemorate his 500th victory, with the ATP's logo and '500 Tommy Haas' emblazoned on the bonnet. The German is rightfully proud of his achievement: 'It makes me really proud and for sure this is one of my biggest achievements after everything that happened. The fact that it happened here in Vienna makes it very special. Getting such a gift on top of it makes it an amazing day for me.' But I wonder if he's proud enough to cruise around in his new Fiat without having it repainted. There's pride, but there's also feeling like an idiot.

For the record, his 500th win came quite easily against **Jesse Levine**, over five years after his 400th, which was against Agustin Calleri in Montreal 2007. It's been a tough five years. I also can't help but wonder what the contingency plan was had Haas somehow lost to Levine. Would the Fiat have followed him to his next tournament, which is Valencia, and would receiving it have been quite as special there? So many questions fated to remain unanswered. Here's another: what if Haas then embarked on a sustained losing streak worthy of Donald Young? The Fiat might come to feel like a rather bad

omen. Perhaps they'd just change the 500 to a 499 and give it to him anyway, to bolster his spirits. Does Fiat make a 499?

Hearts of Gold

Vienna, Stockholm, Moscow, Finals

There were three ATP finals played almost concurrently last night, or yesterday depending on your time zone of preference. All of them took place in continental Europe, and each of them was played under a roof. Lest there was lingering doubt, this is why it's called the European Indoors. Given their near simultaneity, watching all three was theoretically problematic, but made eminently more possible by sufficiently robust coffee and the gallantly straining internet connection at my panoptic command centre in Melbourne, which I like to pretend is really a super-villain lair in a hollowed-out volcano. It was the middle of the night, and everyone else was asleep. I was free to pretend as I pleased. Sometimes I pretend my dog (Richter) is my chief henchman and enforcer, but with a secret heart of gold. Anyway, Juan Martin del Potro won in Vienna, Tomas Berdych in Stockholm, and Andreas Seppi in Moscow. They beat Gregor Zemlja, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Thomaz Bellucci, respectively. That's all you really need to know. The rest will be padding.

Stockholm gave us the best of the finals, although Tsonga's partial collapse from a set and 4/2 wasn't the most noteworthy of the capitulations. That accolade he cedes to Bellucci, whose absurdly wide eyes went even wider still when it came time to serve for his first hardcourt title in Moscow. He was broken back, but then broke again. By the time he was broken back for the second time he looked like Gollum, though with a tan and better hair. Seppi took the tiebreak pretty comfortably, and was far stronger in the final set, when Bellucci's first serve almost disappeared. It is Seppi's third career title, and second this year. Most curiously, he was won all three of his titles on completely different surfaces, defeating a stroppy Janko Tipsarevic on grass in Eastbourne, a typically sporadic Benoit Paire on clay in Belgrade, and now on indoor hardcourt. The Italian rises to No.22 in the rankings, and in the, wait for it, *Race to London*. With only two weeks remaining of the regular season, I am confident in declaring Seppi might not quite make it to England this time round.

Both Berdych and del Potro almost certainly will make it, and there's every chance Tsonga will, too. But ATP is taking nothing for granted, and I suppose it's in their interest to sustain the alleged drama of qualification for as long as possible. Thus we learned that Nicolas Almagro remains a mathematical chance of qualifying, assuming he posts some

frankly amazing results in Valencia (which is possible) and Bercy (which isn't). The players who are in contention are presumably sick of being asked about it. Reciting disinterestedly from the ATP Media Handbook (22nd edition), Berdych remarked that 'London is always a goal every season. You have to play well the whole year to qualify.' Rafael Nadal has of course proved that this is false. The Spaniard has qualified fourth, and hasn't played since June. There was also a period from Roland Garros until the US Open when Berdych himself played like rubbish. But I suppose his point stands, the point being that the ATP has probably asked him to sell the merits of the Tour Finals when asked.

Del Potro had earlier chanted from the same hymnbook after he'd finished off Gregor Zemlja in Vienna: 'I also look forward to London. I'm looking better to qualify there. We have two big tournaments coming next week. They have the chance to get points also, so it will be very interesting to see how we are going.' It is the universal language of the sports star, in which nothing of interest can be said, even by accident. It's a factory-packaged lexicon designed to ensure that even nice young men with hearts of gold speaking in their second language can all sound mostly interchangeable. The conceit of the interview is that it helps us connect with the players, whose astounding physical gifts can otherwise make them seem remote. The irony is that they have learned the hard way that it is in their interests to all sound more or less the same. Connecting with them is the last thing that is likely. You could take any of the winner's statements from any of yesterday's finals, and with only minor alterations there would be no way of knowing who said what.

Luckily, these gifted men are paid the big bucks to do more than talk about tennis. They also play it, and on court they're permitted far more scope for self-expression. In the Vienna final del Potro as ever chose express himself via blasted forehands and huge first serves up the T. The only dicey moment came early in the first set when he dropped serve, but after Zemlja essentially broke himself back del Potro's sailing grew relatively plain. Still, it was a tremendous week for the Slovenian, who qualified and then beat Tommy Haas and Tipsarevic on his way to the final. If you haven't seen Zemlja play he is well worth a look, with an attacking yet utterly unglamorous disposition and a decent turn of speed. He'll go back to expressing himself on the Challenger circuit for the rest of this year, but I cannot doubt he'll feature more regularly on the main tour in the years to come. His new ranking is No.50.

Here in my fearsome command bunker, my burly henchman, or henchdog, had long since retired to his bed, and my coffee had grown cold and, it turned out, even less drinkable. I love the European Indoors – it's in Europe, and it's indoor – but that squalid

ache of exhausted eye-balls and the tart tang of too much caffeine was wearily familiar. It's the feeling all super-villains experience before they too retire to sleep.

Those Masters of Bright Shadow

Basel, Final

(2) del Potro d. (1) Federer, 6/4 6/7 7/6

Despite some less than divine form, Roger Federer had reached a seventh consecutive final at the Swiss Indoors in Basel. There he was obliged to face Juan Martin del Potro for the seventh time this year, having already won the other six meetings. If he'd won today's final he would have tied John McEnroe on 77 career titles. For fans of Federer – and the nine thousand souls thronging the St Jakobshalle were assuredly that – the number seven must have assumed an almost biblical significance. Not that the locals require much prompting to think about Federer in those terms. In the end, as he was defeated by the eminently deserving del Potro, there was a kind of uneasy silence. Was this the end of days? Probably not, but if it wasn't revelatory, it was perhaps revealing. These two are the reigning masters of the great indoors, and Federer had finally tasted defeat in the seat of his power.

The way Federer's presence permeates Basel echoes the way Mozart's saturates Salzburg, with the difference being that Federer is still alive (so, for that matter, is Basel) and therefore gets to enjoy it, assuming that is possible. (There is also the small difference that Mozart never produced much of note in Salzburg, at least by his own heavenly standards. Idyllic as it is, he couldn't wait to get away, and he never returned. Naturally the locals didn't realise what they'd lost until well after he'd departed and, indeed, perished. That was the way of things back then, with the internet still in its infancy. A man became worm-food well before he was canonised, and women were obliged to wait longer even than that. Of course, Salzburg, now the world's prettiest and kitschiest museum, is determined to make up for lost time. Early neglect probably explains why their regard for Mozart now borders on the fanatical. That famously homely profile stares down blankly from every available vantage. An entire industry exists around the practice of moulding chocolate into his putative likeness: with the *Mozartkugeln* being merely the most notorious. Lindt is destined to work similar magic on Federer. Sometimes adulation reaches a sufficient ecstasy that only confectionery can express it.)

In the end, or at the beginning, Mozart left for Vienna, for him the centre of a world to which all roads necessarily tended. Two centuries later and the world has no centre.

Federer conquered all of it. The fact that he keeps returning to Basel and then doing some of his best work while there probably explains part of the adulation. He is adored everywhere tennis is played, and famous even where it isn't, but he never forgets where he's from. Basel repays him with unstinting regard and an ironclad guarantee that no one will ever want for apparel emblazoned with his logo. One got the sense this last week that he found it all rather exhausting, and his performances on court gave a very strong impression that had it been any other 500 level event he would have given it a miss. It's an impression that was only reinforced by his announcement that he won't defend his title at the Paris Indoors next week, thus conceding the year end No.1 ranking to Novak Djokovic.

Del Potro, on the other hand, is raring to go. Indeed, he's been raring to go for quite some time now. He won Vienna last week, and was mostly untroubled on his way to the final this week. The ATP said he'd 'eased his way' to it, which is hard to argue with, since the term can mean anything. (I'm easing my way to the end of this post, with 'easing' here being synonymous with 'meandering drunkenly'.) Anyway, having attained the final, del Potro had every reason to stop raring quite so lustily. He was facing the world No.1 on his home court, whom he hadn't beaten in three years. But it was the raring Argentine who started stronger, while Federer was flat and pensive, recalling his loss to Murray in Shanghai, and sternly contradicting the Sky Sports commentators who'd been breezily convinced he would get up for the final, as though this is an intrinsic characteristic of all champions all the time. Despite, or perhaps because of the locals, who never gave off cheering his every won point, Federer looked like he'd prefer to be lounging somewhere warm and coastal. It was del Potro who seemed happiest to be there.

The first set ended 6/4, and to be fair the defending champion only struggled in the service game in which he was broken, although the term struggle belies the ease with which he was broken. But del Potro served magnificently, and was never in trouble at all. Even second serves, never his sturdiest stroke, were finding the lines. Meanwhile the forehand, which is his sturdiest stroke, was justifying every comparison to artillery, no matter how trite. He even avoided his usual trick of being endlessly flummoxed by sliding serves to the deuce court. It was an almost perfect set from del Potro, proving that sometimes even Mozartean grace is powerless before sufficiently Beethovenian power.

The second set was tighter, mainly because del Potro began to lose rhythm on his first serve. The *sforzandos* started falling late. Federer earned an actual break point. He'd clearly forgotten how valuable these are indoors, despite the earnest advice of his 9,000

closest friends, and quickly discarded it. Mark Petchey made the convoluted but correct point that Federer was putting himself under too much pressure now that he had an actual look at more returns, with the net result being that he wasn't making many more of them than before. Leif Shiras concurred. Some 15,000 miles in the future, my clock now read 1.30am, and outside my front window the world's tardiest roadwork crew was getting in some quality practice with a jackhammer. I was thus in no state to argue. Nevertheless, both players held fairly comfortably until just before the tiebreak, when Federer held fairly gingerly, which the Sky commentators never stopped believing had been his opponent's best chance. But hold Federer did, and the tiebreak ensued.

This, it should be said, was not del Potro's finest tiebreak. In fact, even Federer said that afterwards. Naturally given the protagonists, there were some decent shots, and two of these saved set points for del Potro. Federer won a long rally on the third set point, gave a shout and marched to his chair. The crowd gave over to delirium, and we were into the deciding set. Barry Cowan chimed in with the reminder that Federer had won more matches from a set down than anyone else this year, with the number being twelve. Del Potro fans spontaneously united in wishing he'd shut his mouth. When Cowan then brought up the Roland Garros quarterfinal, they were doubtless willing to shut it for him. They were justified in feeling that their man had been the better player all day, but that Federer had escaped.

Nonetheless, Cowan's words came to feel prophetic when Federer continued to hold easily but fashion some inroads in the Argentine's service games. There were more break points. The first time this happened del Potro silenced the crowd by holding with three exceptionally mighty forehands, each more like a howitzer mounted on a bazooka-firing cannon – a heavily classified super-weapon called a *howzooka*, probably – than the last. His next game featured three more break points. Sadly, the world No.1's renowned capacity to insulate his mind from its surroundings meant that he was still no wiser on what to do with these. The experts on Sky, who persist in calling them 'break point opportunities', believed that this had constituted Federer best chance. In this they proved correct.

The eventual tiebreak provided Federer with a fitting platform to both repay his opponent for that execrable second set effort, and to finish off the week as he'd started it, which is to say not terribly well. It commenced well enough with a forehand winner and an ace, but from 2-2 Federer became patchy and prone to mistiming, while del Potro remained solid, and forcing where it was required. Three match points came, although only one of these was required as Federer's last forehand fell wide. What became of the other two match points no man can say, even Barry Cowan.

Once Hawkeye had confirmed the final out call, del Potro gave the most muted, sweet and appropriate victory celebration imaginable, and embraced Federer at the net. After shaking Lars Graff's hand, he crossed himself and raised his arms briefly aloft and clapped. The crowd, initially stunned to discover that match point isn't merely a structural precursor to Federer winning, were by now standing and cheering. Del Potro is pretty popular, too, and deservedly so. Unquestionably he had deserved to win this title, given the way he has played this week, and the way he conducted himself today. Indeed, I'd remarked as that final set looked to be slipping away that it would have felt supremely unfair had he somehow lost.

But nothing in this sport is given, least of all beating Federer in a Basel final. This one was earned. This is del Potro's biggest title this year, and indeed his most substantial since the US Open of 2009. I confess to experiencing a profound sense of satisfaction, infused by a healthy portion of exhaustion, as he held the trophy overhead, the only trophy in the entire European indoors that doesn't inspire immediate derision. He will arrive in Paris, and perhaps London, as the hottest indoors player on tour. Indeed his only indoors loss this year came to Federer in Rotterdam back in February. On the other hand, this is Federer's first loss indoors (hardcourt) since falling to Gael Monfils in Bercy in 2010. In the last three seasons he has accrued seven titles on this surface, and lost only twice. Both men have proven their mastery in the bright shadows of February, October and November. Notwithstanding the intervening Paris Masters, how these two fare in London's O2 Arena will be of urgent interest, assuming Federer is rested, and del Potro hasn't played himself to death.

Six and Two

Paris Masters, Days One and Two

Persistent readers of The Next Point may well have noted my enduring fondness for the European indoor season, although I'd assert that any perversity in my regard owes not to the tournaments themselves, which are worthy even when dull, but because of the lights, which are sallow and flat even when they aren't flashing or strobing. With the exception of Valencia, which owing to latitude and superior architecture can only simulate winter, these events feel soulful and gloomy. I love it. It's a question of contrast.

As I write it is late morning in Melbourne, and the mercury has already bubbled up past 30C, which according to the unfailingly helpful lady trapped inside my iPhone equates to 86 degrees in the archaic and confusing scale that still sees use in Belize, the Cayman

Islands and the United States of America. Spring has uncoiled, and it has leapt for the throat. Word is we'll hit 35C before the change arrives. A pair of English tourists have just combusted outside. That's Halloween in Australia. Meanwhile in Paris it isn't Halloween yet, and **Tomas Berdych** has just wrenched a patchy first set tiebreaker from **Andreas Seppi**. As they sit down the stadium lights go dark and each man is luridly spot-lit, so that we can better watch him fiddle with his equipment and stare straight ahead. There is no question that this is all occurring on the far side of the world.

The frigid gloom of the Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy can seem almost noirish in its allure. It always looks like the chill would find its way into your bones. It won't be finding its way into **Roger Federer's** bones, who of course pulled out following his loss to **Juan Martin del Potro** in the Basel final. He would undoubtedly have done the same had he won, given the relatively heroic length of the match, and the way the next few weeks are configured. It was surely the right decision, but it's still a shame, since he was the defending champion in Paris. Hopefully even his detractors agree that no tournament is richer for having him miss it. **Rafael Nadal** has of course withdrawn from 2012 entirely, and you can bet that wherever he is, he's sensibly avoiding real winter. There was talk, as there is most years, that **Novak Djokovic** would also miss the event. As recently as yesterday he was attending to matters in Belgrade, but's he's since ventured to France.

I suspect I'm not alone in disapproving of the removal of the gap week between the Paris Indoors and the World Tour Finals, even as I concede that the reason for the decision was understandable. The idea was to grant the top players an additional week off at the end of the year. But I can't help but think there must have been a better way. Paris will inevitably suffer for it, and it suffers enough even in the best of years. It isn't merely that Federer and Nadal aren't there –Nadal would have been absent regardless – but also that other top players that *have* turned up will begin to weigh up the cost of participation as the week goes on.

To those who've already qualified, the truth is that London matters more than Paris. For Berdych and **David Ferrer**, who titled last week in Valencia, there is also a Davis Cup final looming after that. Meanwhile del Potro has just won back-to-back titles in Vienna and Basel, including the enervating final last Sunday. It's hard to image he'll push himself too sternly at Bercy, especially as he's in Djokovic's quarter and is already hauling around his share of late-season niggles. **Andy Murray** will be keen to perform well at the O2, especially given his mighty English summer campaign, and in light of last year, when he wore himself out in Asia and Paris and was compelled to leave the event early.

Meanwhile Djokovic has already secured the year end No.1 ranking, and to even reach the later rounds in Paris he'll potentially have to survive **Sam Querrey**, **Milos Raonic** and **John Isner**, and then face **Jo Wilfried Tsonga**. He'll be bruised and flak-happy come London. Of all the top players, only Tsonga has a compelling reason to fight his heart out. He has won this event before, and is defending runner-up points from last year. He also hasn't technically qualified for the tour finals, but that really should be a mere technicality, assuming he doesn't lose in an early round, which he almost did. Removing the week's break between Bercy and London only muddled a complicated situation. I'll throw my negligible weight behind Guy Forget's proposal to move the Paris Indoors to a reconfigured February, assuming that its Masters status is maintained.

The corollary to flagging interest among the elite is that lower-ranked players might finally have a legitimate chance at winning a Masters event, which hasn't happened in a long time. The last player outside the top four to win a Masters was Robin Soderling here in Paris exactly two years ago. The last time both Federer and Nadal skipped Bercy was the year Nikolay Davydenko won it, in 2006. Berdych won it in 2005. Tim Henman won in 2003, David Nalbandian in 2007. It feels like we're due for a 'new' champion, and Paris is traditionally the place for it to happen. My outside picks, as ever, were **Philipp Kohlschreiber** or **Mikhail Youzhny**, both of whom managed to lose in the first round, to **Jerzy Janowicz** and **Marcel Granollers** respectively. I didn't see Youzhny's loss, and therefore cannot say or even possibly imagine how it happened, although this won't dissuade me from blaming his shamefully beardless face. He won Zagreb looking like a lumberjack. There's a lesson there. The lesson is that he shouldn't be losing to Granollers on an indoor hardcourt at all. Had Youzhny won, it would have been his 400th career victory. I don't know if the ATP had a commemorative car prepared. If they did they'll need to ship it out to Australia for January. As ever, my dark horse pick for the title was **Florian Mayer**. He has lost, too.

Grigor Dimitrov hasn't lost yet, although in some ways he's lucky to be there at all, since by reaching the quarterfinals in Basel last week he almost missed his chance to qualify this week. But qualify he did, and then managed soundly to beat **Jürgen Melzer** in the first round. Notwithstanding some trouble serving out the first set, and a developing obsession with tiebreaks, he is, to be honest, looking quite superb. Barry Cowan on Sky Sports warned us all not to get ahead of ourselves, and then proceeded to out-pace everyone in heaping praise on the young Bulgarian. Dimitrov won 7/6 6/2. Indeed, it feels like just about everyone who won today has done so by that score line. Janowicz managed it against **Marin Cilic**. **Kei Nishikori** did the same against **Benoit Paire**.

As I write Berdych has just finished off Seppi. After that dicey first set tiebreaker, he galloped away in the second, predictably allowing the Italian just two games. This was the cue for the lights to go haywire, since it is the belief of indoor tennis events that this makes everything more exciting. It's part of the twee charm of these events, and I wouldn't be without it. Meanwhile from outside my window comes the steady crackling of mad dogs and Englishmen bursting into flame under the noonday sun.

Variations on Lethal Power

Paris Masters, Days Three and Four

Querrey d. (2) Djokovic, 0/6 7/6 6/4

(Q) Janowicz d. (3) Murray, 5/7 7/6 6/2

For the first time in precisely two years, a Masters 1000 event will be won by a player outside of the top four. If it was going to happen anywhere, it was probably in Paris, and if it was going to happen any time, the chances are that it would happen this week. Two of the top four never showed up, and the other two have already left. If London wasn't on their mind already, it certainly is now.

Novak Djokovic was yesterday upset by Sam Querrey from a set and a break up, while today Andy Murray suffered a similar fate at the hands of Jerzy Janowicz, with the added twist that the Scot served for the match and even held a match point. In both cases the belief has rapidly disseminated that the higher ranked player would have taken a straight sets win, and did his utmost to achieve that. But when his hitherto over-matched opponent showed steely resolve to level the match, the choice became whether to fight out a tough three set win or to lose convincingly. The season has only a week and a half to go, and everyone's energy reserves have never felt more finite. In other words, the idea is that once they dropped the second set, Djokovic and Murray tanked. I will, for the moment, leave to one side the question of whether this is true or not.

There was a time when so serious an accusation would only have been levelled by a given player's detractors. After all, the accusation is one of bad sportsmanship, and the ATP has a rule imposing penalties for lack-of-best-effort, although in order to actually be charged a player must go some way towards recreating The Baumer's meltdown from *The Royal Tenenbaums*. However, what is most troubling is that we have reached a point at which it is the player's most ardent fanatics who are the first to cry 'tank', and invariably the loudest. They actually seem proud of it. In essence, they're implying that poor sportsmanship is preferable to the idea that your favourite lost to a 'lesser' player,

and that they subsequently compounded this by casually lying to the media about it. I've never heard a player come out and immediately declare that they'd tanked.

Indeed, the sport's most famous such admission was Andre Agassi's in *Open*, which he made some 13 years after the event. Unfortunately, in confessing that he'd thrown the 1996 Australian Open semifinal to Michael Chang, Agassi has opened a floodgate. Sadly, it's a floodgate that sluices directly into a septic tank. When you're willing to make such assertions in *defence* of a player, be in no doubt that your regard for the player has exceeded your respect for tennis. Winning and ranking have come to mean more than the means by which those things are achieved, to the detriment of the sport's integrity. Of course tanking happens, but it is never the right thing to do. It is hardly defensible, let alone a worthwhile defence for losing.

Whether Murray or Djokovic tanked or not is, for me, a less interesting issue. I don't think they fought as hard as they might have in their respective third sets, but they'd looked pretty committed before that, and to make too much of such points to unfairly belittle the outstanding efforts of their opponents. Janowicz in particular grew into an almost unplayable colossus in the final set, and the comparisons to Lukas Rosol at Wimbledon are as apt as they are obvious. A few years ago, I recall lamenting the way big men would once upon a time go ungovernably feral for a week or two, and tear draws to pieces, but that this no longer happened, since the top echelon was now so solid and all the big men were head cases. (It was in the course of an initially inspired Robin Haase being ground painfully down by Andy Roddick.) Suddenly, the big men are back, and doing what they're supposed to do, especially indoors. They're playing first-strike tennis, and making their opponent's life miserable.

Murray has fallen to such a player twice in his last three tournaments, although I don't recall the roof being closed when he fell to Milos Raonic in Tokyo. It's also worth mentioning that his last three losses have come after he held a match points (in addition to Paris and Tokyo, there was the heartbreaking loss to Djokovic in the Shanghai final). I don't think this constitutes a meaningful pattern. Of slightly more concern to his fans, and not merely those commentating for Sky Sports, is that his US Open victory has proved less transfigurative than many had hoped it might be. Murray looks about the same as he did before. What this should tell us is that he was good enough to win a major before, but people will doubtless persist in the belief that becoming a Slam champion instils some ill-defined 'champion's mentality'. It also means that Murray will end his best season without a single Masters title, the first time he has failed to win one since 2007.

I first heard of Janowicz that year, when he finished runner-up in the Juniors at the US Open to Ricardas Berankis, an incipient David and Goliath tale that has failed to sustain itself on the professional tour, although there's still a chance if the Lithuanian can get his body in order. The next time I saw him was during a flailing five set loss to Amir Weintraub in Davis Cup (from memory this was the Israeli's first match for his nation). Unsurprisingly, my only real thoughts were that he was a big lad with a big serve. Like everyone else I saw no need to include him in the group of talented youngsters who for the sake of convenience and laziness are endlessly grouped together: Tomic, Harrison, Dimitrov etc. Even at this year's Wimbledon, when he reached the third round and fell to Florian Mayer in five sets, he didn't rise perceptibly in pundit's estimation. His defeat of Ernests Gulbis, accomplished though it was, was still held to be Gulbis' fault, as so much else is.

But beating Murray in Paris has been the result Janowicz needed. The bandwagon is now rolling. He is being compared to Raonic, who lost today. He's still a big lad with a big serve, but he moves particularly well for his size – he has said that fitness is now a major focus – and has decent touch around the court. Murray isn't the easiest player to out-fox, but time and again he was stranded on his heels while a Janowicz drop-shot perished beyond reach. That the world No.3 was already rocking backwards was a testament to the rest of the Pole's game, which is mostly a series of variations on lethal power, which is fearless even when erratic. After winning Janowicz fell heavily to the court, and his smile was boundless. It was, by his own account, the 'most unbelievable day' of his life.

In other news from Bercy, both Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Janko Tipsarevic have successfully qualified for next week's World Tour Finals by reaching the quarterfinals, defeating Nicolas Almagro and Juan Monaco respectively. I could say that no one had been in any real doubt that this would transpire, but that would be to insult those who spent considerable time thrashing out the mathematical scenarios whereby Gasquet, Isner or others might squeeze through. Juan Martin del Potro also lost, which is either a good or a bad thing depending on how you look at it. Good because he might be better prepared for London next week. Bad because this could have been a real chance for him to pick up his first Masters title. There's always next year.

For the record, of all the players remaining in the draw only Tsonga and Tomas Berdych, who earlier in the day survived a rampant big man in Kevin Anderson, have won a Masters event in their careers. Both men have one, and in both cases it came here at the Paris Indoors.

Luck of the Draw: World Tour Finals 2012

Having exhausted their supply of bombastic hullabaloo the night before at the ominously-lit player's party, today's draw ceremony for the 2012 Barclays ATP World Tour Finals turned out to be a fairly muted affair. Juan Martin del Potro was on hand to ensure it was all above board. Once it was released, the ramifications of the draw took all of three seconds to sink in. They were five-fold.

Firstly, it became immediately apparent that it is possible to divide up the world's top eight eligible players into two groups that are strikingly uneven. Secondly, Rafael Nadal's absence has a strong bearing on this. Thirdly, in downplaying this imbalance some commentators were obliged to take dramatic understatement to a truly transcendent level. Fourthly, anyone who mentions the tour finals but forgets to include the title sponsor will have that sponsor's name inserted awkwardly into any quotable material. Fifthly, the special round robin format of the [Barclays] World Tour Finals requires a new appendix to *Bracketology, the Reading of Draws, and Why Men Have to Sleep Around*. The tour finals pose something of a problem for the professional Bracketologist, quite aside from the perennial concern of finding time for work amidst all the scientifically-mandated infidelity. A few of these six points will be addressed in due course, but certainly not in that order.

If the tour finals were to be staged elsewhere, the two groups of players would hopefully be given more evocative names, like Lotus and Moon or Lust and Envy, and the lads would be kitted out in some representative local duds. London really missed an opportunity to garb them all as chavs, instead opting for austere pinstriped suits. They looked uncannily like stockbrokers, especially Novak Djokovic in his spectacles. The groups were called Group A and Group B. They could more usefully have been called Bloodbath and Pillow Fight, respectively. Here is why:

Group A (Bloodbath)

1. Novak Djokovic
2. Andy Murray
3. Tomas Berdych
4. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga

Group B (Pillow Fight)

1. Roger Federer
2. David Ferrer

3. Juan Martin del Potro
4. Janko Tipsarevic

Federer is the two-time defending champion at the tour [Barclays] finals, and has won it a total of six times in the past decade. In this year's edition, he'll commence with a combined 30-3 against his group-mates, with all three of those losses coming to del Potro, but only one of those occurring in the last three years. Admittedly that loss came just two weeks ago in Basel, but Federer surely intends on playing better than that. I should mention that aside from Nikolay Davydenko, del Potro remains the only person to defeat Federer at this venue. But that was a long time ago, and this del Potro is surely fatigued, has just lost to Michael Llodra in Paris, and must face Ferrer first, a match-up that favours the Spaniard. Then again, Ferrer still has a final to play in Paris. Federer meanwhile opens against Tipsarevic, who has been in quite terrible form of late, and who in any case hasn't looked much like beating the Swiss since January 2008. For Tipsarevic neither group was going to be easy. Federer will assuredly make the semifinals, but whether he is joined by Ferrer or del Potro will depend quite heavily on how that pair fare against each other.

Meanwhile over in the Meatgrinder section, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga must be wondering what he did to piss off that old gypsy woman. Like Tipsarevic, the Frenchman hasn't been at his best in recent months, and I sadly cannot imagine he'll repeat last year's run to the final. Admittedly given the season he's had, any configuration of available players would have been problematic. His record against the rest of the top ten is 1-11 in 2012, and he has fallen twice to Berdych in the last month. Berdych's recent record against Djokovic and Murray hasn't been especially good, and readers may recall how utterly blunted he was by Djokovic in Shanghai last month. Uncontroversially, I expect Murray and Djokovic to make it through the round robin, but I also think they'll be considerably more dinged up than Federer, and it'll be a nice question which of them gets to face him first. Those among their fans who'd so gleefully celebrated their favourite tanking in Paris might learn to be careful what they wish for.

The phrase 'a little bit' sees much use in sports commentary, which seems ironic given most commentator's tendency to soar into unfettered hyperbole given the merest opportunity. Cricket fans are perhaps familiar with Tony Greig's indefatigable recourse to the phrase. 'The pitch is opening up a little bit at the Paddington End' might be used to describe a crevasse into which the bowler has just lost his shoe. 'There's a little bit of swing out there' might fail to evoke a Waqar Younis yorker that was initially aimed at second slip. Shane Warne's famous deliveries to Andrew Strauss or Mike Gatting, by this definition, spun 'a little bit.' So when Peter Fleming remarked that the groups for the

[Barclays] ATP World Tour Finals were 'a little bit' unbalanced, I assumed it was merely more of the same. He then went on to qualify this, however, by matching up each of the players, and concluded that Group A was 'marginally tougher' than Group B. I suppose it is, in the sense that patting a lone purring tabby is a marginally more agreeable feline experience than being set upon by a horde of them. With their tiny claws, and those cruel, cruel eyes . . .

It's a worthwhile thought experiment to see how this draw would have shaken out had Nadal turned up, and assuming he was in something approaching fighting trim. He would have been drawn in Federer's group, although it must be said that the O2 Arena is the court upon which Nadal troubles the Swiss the least. Rounding out Group B would have been Berdych and Tsonga, while Ferrer and del Potro would have moved over to Group A. Tipsarevic would have been the alternate. That's quite a different configuration, and, I would argue, a more balanced one. If nothing else, it suggests that the top four and the group of four players ranked below them complement each other quite well, and that draws can be thrown into minor disarray, even round robin draws.

Anyway, it is what it is, and each man can only make the best of the hand that was shakily thrust his way. I can't think of a much fairer way to conduct things, aside from having all eight players dropped into a narrow alleyway in Pamplona, and having Jerzy Janowicz released amongst them. Incidentally, the newly added appendix to *Bracketology* includes full colour illustrations of how this might look. Unfortunately, the graphic nature of these images has seen the book referred to the classification board.

Trees and Planets

Paris Masters, Final

(4) Ferrer d. (Q) Janowicz, 6/4 6/3

David Ferrer has won his first Masters title, in, of all places, Paris. He is a small man, and grew smaller still as he collapsed onto his beaming face after winning today's final, but his sudden exultation was immense and irresistible. A Barcelona title might well mean the world, but winning Bercy was extraplanetary, which the Palais Omnisports helpfully illustrated by immediately transforming itself into a planetarium. They just can't leave those lights alone. This part of the planet being France, the crowd's reaction had been mixed during play, but was mostly rapturous now that it had concluded. The Parisians had really taken to Jerzy Janowicz as the week wore on, and the camera, during those

brief moments when the lighting permitted it, had no trouble picking out great red swatches of Polish support.

Those fans who'd feared, with some reason, that Ferrer might end his career without a Masters can finally know peace, or could if peace was a state that any sports fan can truly know for long. Meanwhile those who'd gleefully written Ferrer off as a jumped up journeyman are faced with the choice of whether to revise their low opinion upwards, or instead to denigrate his achievement. Predictably, this being the internet, the latter option has proven more attractive.

It doesn't help that the Paris Indoors boasts the most diverse winners list of all the Masters events. Firstly there is the minor quirk whereby no man has won it twice in a row since 1971, when Arthur Ashe successfully defended a strikingly different event held in a completely different location. This is somewhat surprising, since Bercy has for several decades represented the jewel in the weathered and unblushingly modernist crown of the European Indoors, and has boasted no shortage of multiple champions among the elite. Boris Becker won it three times, as did Marat Safin. Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi won a couple each. Roger Federer finally won it last year. Novak Djokovic claimed it in 2009. All of these men have been ranked No.1.

But, in the last fifteen years, Bercy has worked hard to cement its status as the Masters event of choice for those players who've never won one before, and may never win one again. Since 1997, it has provided the only Masters triumph for Greg Rusedski, Sebastien Grosjean, Tim Henman, Tomas Berdych, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, Robin Soderling, and now Ferrer. (David Nalbandian's 2007 twin-Masters title run also falls vaguely into this category.) What is mainly striking about this list is the high quality of the players on it. These are men who at their best were (and still are) filling out the pointier end of Slam draws, and all of them qualified for the season-ending tour finals at least once. By those lights, it should have been obvious that the answer to the searing question of where Ferrer would win his first Masters title was Paris. It should have been, but it wasn't.

My money was on Shanghai, notwithstanding that clay is Ferrer's best surface. But implicit in any such selection was the realistic assessment that victory on any surface would require eluding the top four, unless he somehow managed to meet Andy Murray in a Rome or Monte Carlo final, which wasn't likely. In other words, if he was to win a Masters, he probably wouldn't do it by causing an upset. He was thus arguably lucky that Sam Querrey took out Djokovic, although there's no sound reason to believe the Serbian would have stuck around until the semifinals. As he always does, Ferrer kept his

head down and dealt with those opponents he was supposed to beat. If he doesn't cause many upsets, nor does he suffer them very often, even faced with a recklessly inspired Michael Llodra. All the while he no doubt maintained an interested eye on the other half of the draw, through which Janowicz was progressing with the delicate grace of a M1 Abrams tank through an aged care facility.

It was the first time Ferrer had contested a Masters final as the favourite, and I was curious to see whether this new dynamic might rupture his equilibrium. He was supposed to beat Janowicz, but then so had all of the Pole's opponents this week. It was a difficult position, but one Ferrer managed well. He kept on doing what he always does, remaining largely unflappable even with the tension dialled all the way up. Perhaps he committed more errors than usual, but he made far fewer than his opponent. If he found the endless David and Goliath references as deflating as I did, he didn't show it.

It's hard to say if the occasion got to Janowicz, since he's never found himself in that situation. No Pole ever has. It's hard to believe that playing so many fraught matches day after day hadn't taken its toll. He has redoubled his focus on fitness, but he's played a lot of tennis, and he was faced with a veteran world No.5 whose ranking is partly a testament to his capacity to run down very fits guys in fifth sets. More serves were coming back, and those audacious drop shots – one of the week's special treats – earned fewer cheap points. Still, Janowicz forged chances in both sets – a break point at 4/4 in the first, and a break near the start of the second. But the sense was unavoidable that once Ferrer had dealt with these situations, by holding and breaking respectively, he would push on with it. And so it proved.

Given the thunderous emergence of Janowicz this week it is debatable whether Ferrer's maiden Masters title really qualifies as the premiere story of the week. I suppose it's lucky we're under no obligation to rank the achievements, notwithstanding that ranking things is intrinsic to the enterprise of sports, not to say culture. In any case, it is too early to tell. We'll have to wait and see precisely what this heralds for Janowicz, although one can confidently assert that you don't fluke five consecutive wins over top twenty opponents, not all of whom heard London calling (Janko Tipsarevic apparently found its allure irresistible). Indeed, by reaching the Bercy final Janowicz has himself almost risen to the top twenty. He gained 43 places this week, and landed on No.26. He'll be seeded at the Australian Open. Then we'll find out what he's made of.

Ferrer, on the other hand, has all of a day to savour his triumph, and play with his tree. He faces Juan Martin del Potro at the O2 Arena on Tuesday. As the only top man to have lingered in Paris, it will be fascinating to see just how weary even the putatively

indestructible Ferrer will be. Certainly he'll be exhausted from the trophy presentation, the length of which was sufficiently heroic to give any watching CBS executives a stroke. Soon after the [Barclay's] ATP World Tour Finals he'll spearhead Spain's team in the Davis Cup final. With all this ahead of him, some prudent types have suggested he too should have fled Bercy early. But they're wrong. He has won his first Masters title, and I doubt he'd trade it for the world.

No Surprises

World Tour Finals, Days One and Two

There is a certain satisfaction to be had when things more or less turn out the way we said they would, and reality graciously yields to our preferred take on it. This is especially the case for those who essay predictions on professional sports. For the gambler this satisfaction translates into cash rewards. For the fan whose favourite has won this satisfaction can endure for some time, especially if the prediction was bold and the occasion significant, in some cases producing enough goodwill to drown a guinea pig. But for anyone purporting to write about sports, the satisfaction is more ephemeral, and rapidly subsumed by the realisation that your task has only grown harder. Put candidly, it's always simpler to be amusing about upsets and disasters, and the more extravagant they are, the easier it becomes. In all fields, cock-ups make for great copy.

All of which fails to bring me to the World Tour [Barclays] Finals, currently playing at London's O2 Arena. So far there have been four matches completed, and not one of them was an upset. Even the two that were close had been anticipated as such. In most pundits' minds today's second match between David Ferrer and Juan Martin del Potro had probably seemed the least certain. I'll therefore start with that one, for no better reason than this being the point at which this paragraph has arrived and I have to start somewhere. You'd probably be surprised how often that is the case. I'll try to invent a better justification for this later.

(4) Ferrer d. (6) del Potro, 6/3 3/6 6/4

Notwithstanding del Potro's pronounced advantages as a tennis player – or in brain-melting Roger Rasheed parlance, his 'upsides' – in hindsight it's tricky to justify why his first match with Ferrer was considered so dicey. (I'm not excusing myself from this.) The Spaniard is ranked higher, has won considerably more matches and tournaments each year, and was riding a winning-streak of ten matches, having secured his first Masters title in Paris just two days ago, and Valencia the week before that. He has also defeated the Argentinean three times in a row, across clay, grass and hard courts. On the other

hand, he just secured his first Masters title in Paris just two days ago, and Valencia the week before that. Surely even his mighty legs must liquefy at some point.

But that in itself seems an ironic presumption, since Ferrer's transcendent fitness and determination are the only qualities he earns universal respect for (as well as his hair). His supreme conditioning is a given. I suspect, beyond the nebulous belief that he must be weary lurks the tacit assumption that del Potro is a fundamentally superior tennis player, and that he *should* be beating Ferrer. It's an assumption buttressed by a Major title, and an earth-rending forehand, and a recent victory over Roger Federer. But it is not an assumption necessarily grounded in the reality of the match-up, and it's certainly not an assumption that either player shares.

Nevertheless, it was a fine match, their finest since last year's Davis Cup final. When del Potro held serve under considerable pressure at the start of the second set, and then broke, momentum had definitively shifted. Whereas before he'd maintained a self-defeating restraint he now began to dictate more rallies, which in turn enabled that lovely drop shot winner on set point. The Spaniard's legs had formed a brown blur as he was sent scurrying, and the chatter in commentary turned once more to the leagues those legs had covered. The third set was excellent, with both men approaching their best, though this never quite occurred simultaneously. Ferrer broke early and well, then del Potro returned the favour with some force. Then, serving at 4/5, del Potro bestowed another favour, broke himself and lost the match.

Ferrer, who is at considerable risk of becoming an indoors specialist, was afterward ecstatic, and immensely charming when interviewed on court. He was reminded that his next opponent was Federer, and that his record against the Swiss is 0-13. Smiling, he replied, 'that is not good news. That is very bad news. How would you beat him?' No helpful answer was forthcoming, but the really good news is that by winning today, he might not have to beat Federer at all. Del Potro, on the other hand, probably will have to.

(1) Federer d. (8) Tipsarevic, 6/3 6/1

They'll have their work cut out. The day's earlier match had played out pretty much as expected. Conditions in the O2 suit Federer perfectly, and Tipsarevic was in poor form even before he retired fatigued in Paris last week. There was talk that he still hasn't recovered, although it was hard to tell. He actually saw out the match, so he must be feeling at least a little better. The defending champion broke the Serb in his opening service game, and probably could have broken him even more than he ended up doing, which was a lot. It was enough.

Tipsarevic, maintaining a healthy line in wry understatement and gentle self-pity, afterwards remarked that it hadn't been a great day, and thanked the few fans he had remaining to him. I actually have a feeling he'll be dangerous in his next match, which will be against del Potro on Thursday.

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

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga had been without a coach for a long time, and there was broad consensus that it had been too long, despite the fact that he has sustained a solid top ten ranking for well over a year. But his record against his peers is deplorable, and his form, to be exceedingly generous, has been patchy. He really needed an elite coach to help him rediscover the verve and panache that makes him dangerous to anyone, tempered by a greater appreciation of the game's subtleties. Or so we'd all believed. Apparently what Tsonga himself felt he was missing was an ardent self-promoter with a penchant for semi-literate cliché. Luckily Roger Rasheed was available. One fervently hopes that, say, Darren Cahill wasn't, since he would have been an excellent fit. It's a baffling appointment.

All the same, it is far too early to blame Rasheed for Tsonga's enervated and muddled performance against Novak Djokovic on the first day. That was all Tsonga. He had many chances in the opening set, when Djokovic emerged nervous and flat, in that way he sometimes can for reasons that aren't entirely obvious. But the Frenchman failed to capitalise on any of them, and in the second set lapsed into despondency. 'He's just feeding balls to Djokovic,' remarked Petchey in commentary, evocatively. Upsides, sadly, were few.

(3) Murray d. (5) Berdych, 3/6 6/3 6/4

Local hearts fluttered as Andy Murray stepped onto a British court for the first time since he claimed the gold medal for Scotland and its affiliates back in August. Flutter gave way to lurching palpitation when he dropped the first set to Tomas Berdych, although it settled back into mild arrhythmia once he took the second and moved ahead in the third. It must be said, for those of us not deranged by patriotism or troubled by cardiac issues, that it wasn't a great match, and Berdych was rightfully irritated to have lost it. Sky Sports, characteristically circumspect, ranked it slightly below the signing of the Magna Carta, the publication of *Principia Mathematica*, and the 2012 US Open final on the scale of inspiring world-historical events.

Sky is running a viewer poll asking which player will win this year's Barclays ATP World Tour Finals (they never, ever omit the sponsor's name). It turns out fifty per cent of

their viewers have faith that Murray will win, while only eight per cent tip Djokovic . Federer, from memory, was somewhere in between. The other five players were collectively termed 'Other', whereupon they were placed in a sack and dumped into the Thames. Given that the vast majority of people watching Sky are British, and that among those of us who aren't very few are permitted to participate in this poll, the most astounding part of the whole exercise was that Marcus Buckland managed to look surprised at the result.

All the Pretty Drunk Horses

World Tour Finals, Days Three and Four

The World Tour Finals, still the most unfortunately acronymed tennis competition since the Surrey Hills Invitational Tournament made such a splash, has yet to break out of a lurching trot. This is through no fault of the tournament itself. Even the comprehensively winless Janko Tipsarevic was happy to term it 'probably the best [Barclays] event of the year', although he may have been a trifle addled from absorbing one del Potro forehand too many. Sometimes it just happens.

Indeed, it is rare for the tour finals to reach a gallop before the semifinals. Even proverbial horses led to water don't necessarily drink (though it turns out real ones are more biddable once I'd figured out they prefer whisky and lead them to the pub instead). Similarly, you can muster eight of the world's best tennis players and confine them to the O2 Arena, but there's no guarantee they'll produce magic. Since my last post, in which I rather selfishly lamented the way predictable results are harder to write about, there have been four more singles matches played, and each of them was won by the higher ranked player. Back the underdog at your peril.

(2) Djokovic d. (3) Murray, 4/6 6/3 7/5

Of course, it would be a pretty rough task to convince most of the crowd in the O2, not to mention the gallant Sky Sports commentary team, that Andy Murray was an underdog against Novak Djokovic. Boris Becker briefly implied it, and thus risked public scourging. In a similar vein, it seems impossible to convey the idea that just because a tennis match was both long and close doesn't necessarily mean it was great. I think we can take it as read from now on that Djokovic and Murray cannot beat each other in under three and a half weeks. They've been proving it all year, Miami aside. They did it again on Wednesday.

But not all epics are the *Odyssey*. Sometimes they're merely *Paradise Lost*. Yesterday's match was nowhere near as good as their terrific Shanghai final from last month. It also seems to be the case that Djokovic and Murray cancel out each other's strengths so completely that headway is only made when one is playing well and the other isn't. Even so, it is rare in their matches for the winner count to approach the error count, let alone surpass it. Murray was exceedingly sharp in the first set, but was inevitably blunted. In the end it largely came down to Djokovic's superior initiative, and willingness to press forward on points that otherwise might conceivably never end.

(5) Berdych d. (7) Tsonga, 7/5 3/6 6/1

The third set between Tomas Berdych and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga came down to a similar spirit of endeavour from the Czech player, dovetailing nicely with an apparently soul-deep ennui afflicting the Frenchman. Tsonga had briefly roused himself to win the second set, but then collapsed suddenly and fatally after he failed to capitalise on break points in the opening game of the third.

His new coach Roger Rasheed, interviewed *mid-match* by Sky, suggested that Tsonga's minor revival came after he (Rasheed) shouted at him. I'm not sure how true that is, given that Tsonga's first language isn't English, which is in turn only tangentially related to Rasheed's corporatised lingo. Perhaps in trying to puzzle it all out Tsonga was momentarily diverted from his existential malaise. Whatever the reason, for a time he successfully 'brought his assets', but then he exhausted them. He looked so sad. Berdych looked dangerous, and remains an outside chance to make the semifinals.

(6) del Potro d. (8) Tipsarevic, 6/0 6/4

My last post also included the bold prediction that Tipsarevic would assuredly bounce back from his abject loss to Roger Federer. Today he lost zero and four to Juan Martin del Potro, and afterwards expressed mordant pleasure that he'd stretched the match beyond an hour. Given he'd lost 6/3 6/1 to Federer, I'm not sure I can really sell this as 'bouncing back'. As a candid insight into where my brain goes of its own accord, I did spend some time considering which configuration of four games was worse. (In my defence, equine-themed pub-crawls and live tennis being played on Greenwich Mean Time leaves little time for sleep and its attendant pleasures. This morning I called my son by my dog's name. His loud indignation at this affront almost woke the horse, who is nursing a terrible hangover. I digress, though you might have to get used to that.) After only five minutes of furious internal debate I concluded that it didn't really matter. It was rather like having two circling seagulls dump Surrey Hills Invitational Tournaments onto

your jacket, and debating which was less savoury. Sometimes it's best just to move on, and maybe change your jacket.

Tipsarevic afterward insisted that he'd felt physically fine, but that the ongoing duel with his own body had left him little time to practice. I'm not convinced it would have mattered much. Del Potro was in an imposing mood, especially in that first set when he made it clear to the Serb that missing a first serve was a certain prelude to a lost point. I can hardly recall Tipsarevic winning anything behind his second serve, although I do remember him running a lot. There was stiffer resistance in the second set, and he fought mightily to hold on for a few games, to the apparent ecstasy of the 17,000 fans who'd shelled out for the night session. But once the Argentine broke through in the fifth game it felt very much over. Tipsarevic now cannot qualify for the semifinals. Del Potro can, but will have to beat Federer.

(1) Federer d. (4) Ferrer, 6/4 7/6

Del Potro beating Federer is hardly beyond the realm of possibility, given that he did it the last time they played, and that Federer's form is no less skittish now than it was then. It's perhaps a backhanded judgement to deliver, given that the defending champion saw off David Ferrer in straight sets, thereby recording his fourteenth straight victory against him. But as straight sets go, they were pretty wonky, and it would be untrue to say either man was at his best. Federer afterwards raised eyebrows by declaring that he'd played a great match. (For some, this was merely further proof of Federer's sly and underhanded lack of class. Simmering outrage at his alleged crapulence boiled over when he hoodwinked his peers into giving him the Stefan Edberg Sportsmanship Award again, and fooled so many fans into thinking he was their favourite player. It was all too much.)

The match-up between Federer and Ferrer usually comes down to the Swiss manhandling the Spaniard from the court, and then closing down the forecourt. Ferrer can defend against a lot, but he has never proven quite up to the task of defending against that. But today it didn't quite pan out that way. Federer's play was pensive, and many of the rallies saw the ostensibly defensive Ferrer pushing his opponent around. Of course, Ferrer's capacity to step in and play effective indoor hardcourt tennis should by now be beyond question. For much of the match he was the one dictating. Federer's effective recourse to the backhand error also played its part, as did some indifferent serving and Ferrer's ability to transition to offence via stinging crosscourt forehands.

Overall, it came out about even. Federer broke early, but was facing breakpoints in all his own service games, and he couldn't quite save them all. The difference came at the death of each set, when Ferrer was the one to crack, as is all too often the case when he faces a player ranked above him, especially Federer. Federer is through to the semifinals. Ferrer must beat Tipsarevic to book his own spot.

Ambling Home

World Tour Finals, Day Six

(6) del Potro d. (1) Federer, 7/6 4/6 6/3

(4) Ferrer d. (8) Tipsarevic, 4/6 6/3 6/1

The round robin phase of the 2012 World Tour Finals is now complete, with the upshots being that speculation on the final group standings can mercifully stop, and that any remaining ticket holders can rest assured they haven't paid top dollar to attend a match they wouldn't otherwise bother watching on television. In all, the round robin portion featured twelve matches, but there wasn't anything like an upset until the eleventh of these, in which Juan Martin del Potro defeated Roger Federer.

The twelfth match saw David Ferrer eventually beat Janko Tipsarevic in a dead rubber. It is hardly my intention to level any disrespect at either of those guys, who are after all elite exponents of my preferred sport. But it's hard to avoid doing so when I say that for thousands of the fans in attendance it probably wasn't quite how they'd hoped to spend their Saturday night. For what it's worth, Sir Ian McKellan didn't bother to stick around. Luckily the match itself was sternly contested for a while, recalling the pair's excellent US Open quarterfinal. In the end it seemed a fitting amble with which to conclude a round robin phase that never quite hit its stride.

Ferrer's victory did have ramifications for the final standings in Group B, with the wash-up being that Juan Martin del Potro, who'd earlier threatened to secure top spot after defeating Roger Federer, must make do with second. I confess I did not at the time grasp the various permutations whereby this matter might be decided. My fogged confusion was expertly deepened by Sky Sports, who did their soporific best to divest me of my will to care. Surprisingly, it turned out Greg Rusedski had the best and lengthiest read on it, though when it comes to keeping an audience enthralled he is hardly Peter Ustinov. Speaking nothing but common sense, Rusedski is unquestionably spell-binding, though unfortunately it's the same spell that knocked Sleeping Beauty out for a century. I confess I nodded off. It was all academic anyway, and now that Ferrer

has beaten Tipsarevic it isn't even that. It's just what it is, and all the speculation on it was merely wasted breath. Del Potro will face Novak Djokovic in the first of the semifinals, an outcome that one assumes provides him with little solace.

It probably doesn't leave Djokovic's fans feeling terribly relaxed, either, for all that their man boasts a sterling record against the Argentine. Like everyone else, Djokovic has been quite up and down this week, though the fact that he was mostly up against Tomas Berdych in his last match should instil a measure of comfort. But del Potro is certainly looking dangerous. Federer more or less ruined the early part of his season by providing an impenetrable roadblock to titles and later rounds from the Australian Open through to the French. Del Potro thus won't have had the best laugh, but he'll undoubtedly have the last one, securing a couple of vital wins late in the season, and ensuring that Federer's usual practice of going unbeaten through the indoors won't continue. As an interesting quirk, del Potro remains the only man to have defeated Federer in the round robin phase at the O2 Arena. Now he's done it twice.

Federer, it must be said, has not quite looked himself since the early rounds of the US Open some months ago. Whatever issue hobbled him in Basel – he referred to 'niggles', from which his detractors reliably inferred poor sportsmanship – has apparently not resolved itself in the weeks since. He can play well in patches, but too often the fine points are alloyed with sufficient rubbish that his opponent's moments of inspiration decide the outcome. In all Federer hit 46 unforced errors today. Generally this isn't a stat that I find very useful, but many of these errors came in clumps at crucial times, such as the first set tiebreaker. And too many came on shots that were never going to be winners, and could only generously be described as 'forcing'.

For Federer, any realistic assessment of his chances against a player like del Potro (or, say, Berdych) will include the anticipation of any number of spectacular forehands ploughing a furrow through the baseline, or monstrous first serves rupturing the service line. It's just going to happen, and it's not worth pretending that he defends as well as Djokovic or Andy Murray that he can reliably stop it. He defends well, but his great strength is in attack. For Federer, the recent problem with del Potro's game is neither its ferocity nor its regularity – which given the Argentinean's abilities are a given – it is that the Swiss player too frequently places himself in a position in which his opponent's great play becomes decisive.

The service game in which Federer was broken today, in the third set, provides a useful example. A 30/0 lead was carelessly yielded up, including an eminently makeable forehand of his own delivered forcefully into the net. It was at 30/30 that del Potro

suddenly found his range, and then forced the break. But it was hard to shake the sense that Federer's mistakes had provided the platform from which del Potro launched his sortie. As I say, you can assume a player as powerfully accomplished as del Potro, fairly bristling with ordnance, is going to unleash an uncounterable assault at some stage. This was the case in all of their matches this year, including the handful that Federer won.

But just as Federer hasn't been at his best lately, due allowance should be made for the fact that del Potro often wasn't at his best then, with the quarterfinals at Indian Wells and Roland Garros particularly standing out. And just as Federer earned plaudits for those victories, so too should del Potro for these. Beating Federer at the O2 is hardly less audacious than beating him at home in the St Jakobshalle, and in both cases del Potro was fierce and fearless when it mattered most. He'll need to be both, and more, to beat Djokovic.

Nonetheless, due to his continued disinclination to lose to either Ferrer or Tipsarevic, Federer has topped the group. His reward, if one can call it that, is to face Andy Murray in the semifinals. As far as I can tell, this is the third time this year that Federer will face del Potro and Murray back to back. In Dubai he defeated the Argentinean and the Scot in the semifinal and the final respectively. At the Olympics, he very much didn't. This will also be the third time Federer and Murray will face off in London this year, having already split the finals of Wimbledon and the Olympics. Even for those of us who chose to be born outside of Britain, this match cannot help but assume a special significance.

Knowing a Good Thing When You See It

World Tour Finals, Semifinal

(1) Federer d. (3) Murray, 7/6 6/2

Roger Federer tonight defeated Andy Murray to move through to the deciding match of the World Tour Finals. Earlier today Novak Djokovic qualified for the final by beating Juan Martin del Potro. The world No.1 will therefore take on the world No.2 in the last match of the ATP season. Each man has won a Major and three Masters titles this year, and have split their encounters two apiece. While any other configuration of the four semifinalists would hardly have felt wrong, there is a sense that a finale between Djokovic and Federer is exactly right. This, naturally, is a matter of personal perspective. Thankfully it wasn't quite a question of nationalist perspective, about which nothing is natural, although for too many it proved a close run thing.

While Federer and Murray busied themselves with tennis, there was a second contest being played out in the stadium, in commentary booths and across those forms of online miscommunication we ironically term social media. The fact that at least half the crowd weren't supporting Murray was taken by some to be a national disgrace. Swiss flags outnumbered the Union Jack, although I see no reason to think British citizens were waving them. The Times' Neil Harman, whose infatuation with Murray is so searingly pure that it almost rises beyond creepiness, although not beyond ridicule, was particularly incensed. He and ESPN's Brad Gilbert established a small echo chamber on Twitter in which they could lament the deplorable situation whereby some English people supported their favourite player over the guy who happened to be born in an adjacent country. The English, felt Harman, don't know a good thing when they saw it, even as they erupted when Federer won the first set. Afterwards it was implied by some that many of the English were deliberately cheering *against* the Scot, a clear sign that Great Britain's Olympic unity had fractured beyond repair. Lost in all this madness was the small voice suggesting that maybe nationalism had little to do with it. Maybe it was about tennis.

Someone else remarked that Federer's Facebook friends outnumbered the entire population of Switzerland, apparently as clear proof of traitors living elsewhere. Clearly thousands were infesting the O2 Arena tonight, and I hope the Home Office is maintaining files on all of them. One gained the impression that some of their compatriots would like to get a copy of those files, and visit each subject personally in the small hours. I imagine there's a bulging one on Sir Ian McKellan, who'd ensconced himself right by the Federers, and had been rather tardy in praising Murray earlier in the week. Kevin Spacey was there, as well. So much for the Special Relationship.

Over on Sky Sports the experts unanimously predicted a Murray victory, but they mostly did this for the best of reasons, which is to say realistic reasons relating to the sport that was being played. Plenty of impartial pundits backed Murray for the simple fact that he has looked much better than Federer this week, and rapidly dismantled the Swiss when last they met in Shanghai. After Federer won, which I will come to shortly, the tune on Sky darkened abruptly. Opinions were revised sharply floorward. Suddenly there was talk of a 'wake-up call for Andy,' although this was from Boris Becker, who might well have been talking about the loss to Janowicz in Paris last week.

For the first half dozen games, it looked as though any prediction of a Murray victory was not only astute but obvious. The Scot was as sharp as hell, as sharp as in Shanghai, while Federer looked duller even than he had yesterday. A trio of forehands into the net, punctuated by a backhand shank, and Murray had an immediate break. The shift seemed

to come in the seventh game, when Murray missed an exceptionally makeable running backhand pass – especially makeable with *his* hands and leg-speed – and thereafter, and for no readily adequate reason, changed his tactics totally. Suddenly he was passive, diffident and sarcastic, excoriating himself both vocally and in his play. He almost entirely gave off attacking Federer's second serve, which had been such a feature in Shanghai. Federer, cordially invited to play better, began to. The tennis was not brilliant in any sustained sense, but there were still flashes of it. Federer earned his first break point with a chip-charge that should never have worked, and sealed it by rushing the net behind a scathing forehand.

It was in the tiebreak that the tide truly turned against Murray, both on court and elsewhere in the O2. When he lost the exchange to fall down set point, his racquet connected firmly and fatally with the court surface. He spent an age inspecting it for damage, before jogging over to grab another. The crowd booed, although hopefully a portion of the disapproval was directed at Steve Ulrich, who for some reason failed to issue a warning. When Federer subsequently took the set the roar was thunderous. After that the second set darted away from Murray with startling alacrity – Federer afterward confessed to be as surprised as anyone – especially when we consider that many of his victories against the Swiss have come from a set down. But, from serving at 40-0 up in the third game, it was almost as though Murray was determined to lose, as he began to mix in awful drop shots with the other tactics destined to fail. The worst of these drop shots came a game later and barely troubled the net. Mark Petchey suggested that Murray may have run out of ideas.

Murray was broken again for 2/5, with Federer first executing a now-perfect chip charge, and then luring his opponent in to observe a savage backhand pass from closer range. The world No.2 served out the match with a blithe confidence almost entirely the opposite of how he'd commenced the match. The decisive stat for the day was Federer's perfect record on second serve returns: 34 from 34. He chipped almost every backhand return, but tore vehemently into his share of forehands, and overall won 63% of the ensuing points. However, he served poorly by his standards, at only 54% first serves and many of those at reduced pace. Murray's fans, including those few Brits not currently being detained for suspected Swiss sympathies, will surely regret that their man didn't impose himself more forcefully on return. The opportunities were certainly there.

If the second set went by in a hurry it had nothing on the haste with which Murray departed the scene afterwards. I suppose he had no compelling reason to stick around, except to take down the details of those who'd failed the test of allegiance. But,

interviewed later, he showed little inclination to be drawn on the crowd's questionable loyalties, merely suggesting that Federer always enjoys considerable support wherever he plays, due to having won so much. He also declared uncontroversially that it had been the best year of his career 'by a mile.' Meanwhile Federer afterwards admitted that he'd felt like today was going to be his last match of 2012, since Murray was playing so well at the beginning. It wasn't, but tomorrow's final will be, win or lose.

A Modern Kind of Fairy Tale

World Tour Finals, Final

(2) Djokovic d. (1) Federer, 7/6 7/5

Novak Djokovic has ended the frivolous debate over who should be considered the ATP's Player of the Year by defeating Roger Federer in the final of the World Tour Finals, which were hosted in London, sponsored by Barclays and over in a flash. I confess I was unaware that this debate was even being conducted until a few days ago, by which point it had moved beyond mere capitalisation into becoming a regrettable acronym – POTY – the inevitable fate of all such accolades. Any GOAT can tell you that. Anyway, the broad consensus among non-British interests was that Djokovic and Federer had been locked in a desperate race for the POTY. Each had won a Major and three Masters. Federer had won more titles and a silver medal, though Djokovic had gone further in tournaments that mattered more. Victory at the tour finals provided the necessary tiebreak, and now we can now sleep easy: Djokovic's claim to the POTY is beyond quibble. It's an accomplishment that would mean more if it actually meant anything.

By no means do I wish to belittle the many things that Djokovic actually has accomplished, which include finishing as the year end No.1 for the second season in a row, and winning the World Tour Finals for the second time over all, and undefeated at that. It was a week in which none of the top players were at their best, and he proved that his not-as-his-best is still *the* best. If that sounds backhanded, it isn't meant to. Anyone can win when they're playing well, but Djokovic ploughed unbeaten through a whole week of slow starts and minor slumps, and he did it again today. For his efforts he received a trophy with streamers attached to it, like the handlebars on my daughter's bicycle, a fat wad of cash, and a photo-op with the quicksilver Pippa Middleton, who'd apparently forsaken her erstwhile loyalty to his opponent.

Naturally no Tour Final can justify its status without an exhaustive array of disparate celebrities to keep the camera operators occupied, and I'll be damned if we weren't painstakingly shown them all. It wasn't enough to know that Britain's most nubile royal-

in-law was in attendance – although even knowing that did rather tax my interest – the Sky Sports commentators were determined that no viewer should die wondering at the identities of those seated around her. Boris Becker reassured me that the fellow to Pippa's right was her brother, and that as far as he knew she was still single. Although I am generally disinclined to question Becker's knowledge of such things, would-be suitors should probably hold off pursuing Ms Middleton full throttle until they've had this confirmed by sources closer to the palace. The camera alighted randomly on various other notables, who were enthusiastically noted by Sky and immediately forgotten by me. I don't recall seeing Ian McKellan or Kevin Spacey. (As far as star power went, it was a far cry from two years ago, when a cameraman was employed for the sole purpose of finding Diego Maradona in the crowd each day, although my proposal that this could be expanded into a permanent DiegoCam in the corner of the screen was rejected. It's all politics.)

Thankfully, even in the Sky Sports studio some interest remained focussed on the tennis match being played in the midst of the assembled luminaries and their unnamed (and presumably unwashed) vassals. And a strange match it was. Other than the beginning, when Federer looked unstoppable, it hardly seemed as though either player ever had momentum for longer than a few points at a time. It was tight and tough, and the vast majority of points, long and short, were decided by an error one way or another. In all Djokovic won 96 points to Federer's 95. This would be sufficient to tell you the match was close even if the remainder of the statistical and anecdotal evidence wasn't overwhelming.

Federer came out maniacally determined not to repeat his deplorably slow start from the semifinal – he won twelve of the first fourteen points – though he wasn't to know that doing so also required forgoing yesterday's masterful finish. It turns out it's one or the other. Djokovic, on the other hand, wisely emerged tense and wayward. It wasn't long before both players found their range; Djokovic's range was mostly just inside his opponent's baseline, and Federer's appeared to be just beyond it. Federer was broken back, and then broken again a few games later. That mighty forehand just wasn't firing, and the Serbian's preternatural athleticism was blunting his first serve. But then Djokovic stepped up to serve for the first set, made it to set point, and thought better of it. He too was broken back, and tempted the crowd's proven wrath by belting his racquet into the court. As the tiebreaker lurched drunkenly into view, neither player seemed to have much faith in any groundstroke struck harder than three-quarter pace. Time and again, the first man to pull the trigger missed the target, even though it was precisely half the size of a tennis court.

The point of the match, and surely of the tournament given the situation, came with Federer serving at 5-6 in the breaker, which ended when the world No.2 found the target on a hooked forehand pass hit from behind him while scrambling backward. Djokovic turned and stared in disbelief at his player's box, then came around and won the tiebreaker anyway. There was a time when he would have let it get to him, but that was years ago.

If this final was won anywhere, it was in Federer's forehand corner. Of Djokovic's 96 points, about half (42) came from Federer's unforced errors, and 24 of those came from the forehand, ostensibly the most feared shot of the last decade, at least as regards professional tennis. I have no more numbers to reinforce this, but it seemed that a very healthy proportion of those forehand errors came when Federer was forced to his right, and that most of the subsequent errors went long. This occurred regardless of whether the Swiss was sent scurrying for that corner, or obliged to dart merely a few steps. Along with Djokovic's unparalleled ability to stretch and return high-quality first serves onto his opponent's baseline – owing to some unholy alchemy of reflexes, hand-eye coordination and core strength – the relentless mistiming from Federer's forehand provides the key to unlocking the match.

The answer, if indeed there is a question, perhaps lies in their last match – the Cincinnati Masters final – which Federer dominated 6/0 7/6. The statistical breakdown that emerged from that match highlighted how well Federer controlled his own ad court with his forehand. He was incredibly quick to run around it, so much so that Djokovic had a hell of a time even finding the Swiss man's backhand wing, for all that he endeavoured to all afternoon. Is it too fanciful to suppose that Djokovic learned a useful lesson that day, or that Marian Vajda did? Contrary to the expectations of some, Djokovic did not mount a sustained assault on Federer's backhand in today's final, and often only probed enough to open up the forehand wing.

Conversely, did Federer's success in Cincinnati prompt him to move prematurely to his backhand corner, with the result that he was easily caught out time and again? It certainly looked to be an issue of balance – in that Federer didn't have enough of it – and it wasn't as though he was being undone by searching backhands up the line. Indeed, Djokovic hit few of those at all, although there was a crucial one in the tiebreaker. Then again, it is a kind of indulgence to over-analyse these things, and Federer's form hasn't been so stellar of late that one needs to discover new reasons why he wasn't at his best. I've remarked on it before, but even when Djokovic was losing most of their encounters, he still had the ability to wrong-foot Federer without going near the lines.

Nevertheless, Federer was the one to maintain his intensity after that tight first set. He broke immediately, and rode this advantage almost to the end, surviving a particularly enthralling eighth game. Serving for the set at 5/4, he moved comfortably to 40-15. If this didn't already evoke uneasy memories of the 2011 US Open semifinal, then it certainly did after he made two fine first serves and yet lost both points. Again, under immense pressure, Djokovic refused to miss. The world No.1 broke back, and held for 6/5. Now serving to stay in it, Federer continued to defy Pippa's expectations that his forehand must come good at some point, and rapidly fell down 15-40. They were locked at 95 points apiece. Djokovic's 96th point, a backhand that scythed past the incoming Federer, secured him the title, and brought down the O2. Personally, I'm not one for chest-thumping bellows of self-approval, and I confess I sometimes find Djokovic's work in this area overwrought and excessively macho. But that shot, and this victory, more than merited it. If ever one is permitted to raise the roof, is it after crushing a desperate backhand pass to seal victory over Roger Federer in a thunderous stadium in the final match of the season.

And so ends the 2012 ATP season, especially the portion of it played indoors in Europe, otherwise known as the European Indoors. The ether will doubtless grow dense with summary in the coming weeks, and there's still the Davis Cup final to be contested. For now it is enough to say that although Federer wasn't able to reprise his usual autumn heroics, this hardly counts as a failure given that it came at the end of his best season in years. He was, after all, ranked No.1 until the very last week. He wasn't all that far from winning today.

Meanwhile Djokovic ending 2012 as he began it feels entirely appropriate. After today's final he suggested that this season was if anything more satisfying than his last, despite the fact that he was less dominant and won less stuff. There's a lot to be said for backing up the greatest performance of your life, and remaining on top in defiance of widespread expectation that you'll subside. One gets the feeling nothing thrills Djokovic more than proving his detractors very wrong. (That's surely why he doesn't miss when down match point, since a match point is nothing more than the score telling you you're about to lose.) If last year was the traditional fairy tale, then this year was the modern version, in which he doesn't get a princess, but does earn a visit from her more predatory sister.

Davis Cup Final

Lessons Learned

Day One

Ferrer d. Stepanek, 6/3 6/4 6/4

Berdych d. Almagro, 6/3 3/6 6/3 6/7 6/3

The first day of the 2012 Davis Cup final has been completed, with the Czech Republic and the constitutional monarchy of Spain locked at one rubber all. If one was feeling overly wilful or mischievous this could be spun as a political tussle between the old world and the new, between tradition and progress. It's something for Tomas Berdych to consider, lest he grows short on Spaniard-baiting material, which admittedly seems unlikely to happen. There's also a chance he is too tired and wary, having narrowly avoided gagging on the heroic portion of humble pie he'd prepared earlier. Perhaps he's learned a lesson. Part of me hopes not. Still, even if he hasn't, the rest of us certainly have.

For example, we now know that the Prague crowd expresses its disapproval by whistling, and that what they lack in virtuosity they make up for in raw stamina. Expressing ire through whistling, you may be sure, is a distance event. This was eagerly illustrated when Carlos Ramos failed to correctly award a point to Berdych after the Czech player had successfully challenged a winner called out. Ramos was certainly wrong; the point should have gone to Berdych. For a good twenty minutes the locals pursed their lips and made their feelings known with undiminished gusto, which would swell ominously like the Sirens of Jericho whenever Nicolas Almagro commenced his service motion.

Despite sounding like the stadium was rapidly deflating, it ironically pumped Berdych up. Having appeared flat throughout the second set, he fair bounded through the third. Whistling clearly has its advantages, especially as it proved sufficiently loud to drown out the vuvuzela section. (I don't know who invented the vuvuzela, but I do kind of wish it was me. I could make a fortune charging people \$10 each to punch me in the face.) Before too long it subsided, leaving Berdych so diminished that he first surrendered his lead in the fourth, and then the set itself in a tiebreaker.

It went without saying that an Almagro victory would have put Spain in an overwhelming position, given that they'd already won the opening rubber. Or so I thought. Greg Rusedski did not agree: 'If Almagro wins, then Spain is in the driver's seat.' In the end

Berdych did eke out the fifth set, thus technically proving Almagro to be the weaker link, since it's doubtful whether Berdych on this form would have troubled Ferrer for long. But even so, I'm sure it was a closer run thing than Berdych had envisaged, and it's hard to think that this hadn't contributed to the nerves that for a time threatened to paralyse him. Almagro acquitted himself well, in every sense, from his superior serving and aggressive ground game, up to and including his gracious handshake afterwards. It was a lesson in classy behaviour, or at least an example of how politeness can be weaponised. We learned that Reebok has nothing in its current range that comes closer to *bandera roja* than pink.

We also learned that there's really not much to say about David Ferrer beating Radek Stepanek in straight sets, but that in the hands of a master analyst like Rusedski this little can be made to go a long way, or at least for a long time. The actual Eurosport commentary during the match had been provided by Frew McMillan and Chris Bradnam, and was thus quite good, although they only referred to Ferrer as 'underrated' a handful of times. This was well short of the crushing quota achieved over on the Tennis Channel, whose experts rate him so highly that they struggle to come up with much else to say. Almost everything about him, by their estimation, is not accorded the respect it merits from the broader public.

Keen to verify this for myself, I took to the streets. There weren't many people around at that hour in Melbourne, but those seedy revellers I did corner eventually confessed that they didn't rate Ferrer very highly at all, even when I showed them a photo and explained who he was. Some appeared shocked to learn that he has such competent volleys, and that he defends his second serve so well. (None of them hung around long after that, except for one charming transient who insisted he could smell my heartbeat.)

Notwithstanding the scientific validity of my *vox pop* survey, I still think Ferrer's underratedness is mostly overrated. He was the clear favourite today, and played like it, despite a minor hitch in the second set when Stepanek came back hard at him. He won in quick time, serving, passing and running remarkably like you'd imagine a world No.5 would, regardless of rating.

Although the result itself clearly thrilled the Spanish team – even yielding them temporary control of that cherished driver's seat – its brevity won't have troubled the Czech team too much. Stepanek probably wasn't going to win anyway, so it's best he was spared unnecessary toil before the pivotal doubles tomorrow. Whether he'll partner the weary Berdych could be a dicey question, though, and the Czech team has some thinking to do. I suspect he'll play, if only to see his devious plan bear fruit. All this

Almagro 'weak link' talk has been a red herring. It's really Marcel Granollers they're after.

Shredding the Lions

Day Three

Ferrer d. Berdych, 6/2 6/3 7/5

Stepanek d. Almagro, 6/4 7/6 3/6 6/3

The Czech Republic has defeated Spain in the one hundredth final of the Davis Cup. Astute historical observers might note that the event actually began in 1900, while those with a particular gift for arithmetic will hopefully spot the numerical discrepancy. The answer is that, as in so many fields of human endeavour, two world wars proved terribly inconvenient.¹⁵ The Cold War, on the other hand, provided almost no hindrance at all. Indeed, the last time the Czechs tasted Davis Cup glory was in 1980, and they were obliged to share it with any interested Slovaks. This time, for the first time, they have it all to themselves. Meanwhile, this is only the second time Spain has lost a Davis Cup final since the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague. Their latest squad included a world No.5 in career-best form, and a doubles team that had just claimed the World Tour Finals. It was almost enough to guarantee victory. But, as any engineer will tell you, a chain is only ever as strong as its Nicolas Almagro.

In the end, but only in the end, Tomas Berdych was proved right. Despite his many accomplishments, Almagro was indeed the fatally weak point through which the Czech Republic funnelled its assault, and thereby achieved a famous victory. They had to try something. When you're faced with the most impregnable tennis nation of the era, which has claimed more Davis Cups in recent years than nearly every other country combined, you take what you can get, even if it is the assertion that the world No.11 is somehow a liability. The Czechs took what they could get.

Presumably no one was more relieved to see Berdych's astute prediction come to pass than the man himself, for all that such comments are intended to be partly self-fulfilling. Berdych's aim was certainly to seed doubt in any existing cracks in Almagro's mind, and

¹⁵ I note with some interest that Australian defeated USA in the Davis Cup final in both 1914 and 1939, an outcome that might well have precipitated unprecedented global carnage. Of course, there's a slim chance that it's just a coincidence, but can we take that chance? It's probably for the best that my country remains mired outside the World Group.

consequently widen them. The belief, which is widely subscribed to even by the Spaniard's admirers, is that Almagro's ranking around the edge of the top ten represents the upper limit of his abilities, which is restricted not by raw ability but by the near-certainly of his mental collapse in important matches.

Of course, this tactic nearly backfired when the Spaniard acquitted himself superbly on the opening day, and almost force-fed Berdych the healthiest slice of humble pie since Yevgeny Kafelnikov promised Lleyton Hewitt a stern tennis lesson, and then promptly lost. In a hostile environment, on an indoor hardcourt, Almagro pushed Berdych to the limit for four hours, leaving the Czech with a victory that might well turn out to be Pyrrhic given the heroic quantity of tennis still ahead of him. Suddenly the doubts were all Czech. What would *this* Almagro do to a tired Stepanek in a live fifth rubber, if it came to it? These abstract musings took on a practical urgency after Berdych's consummate flogging at the hands of David Ferrer in this morning's fourth rubber.

The loss to Ferrer was Berdych's first loss in Davis Cup in 2012, which ensured that one of the most successful such years in history ended on a slightly down note, at least personally. He had become just the second player to win at least ten live rubbers in a season, but he might have lost the one that mattered most, and badly. Meanwhile, it was Ferrer's eighteenth singles win in a live rubber, for only three losses, and he has been unbeaten this year, winning six matches for the loss of two sets. This was the rubber that many had expected to be pivotal.

Desperate to resuscitate Spain's chances, Ferrer emerged as though unbowed by the slightest concern in the world. He was, from the opening point (an ace), operating on a stratospherically higher plane than Berdych. Ferrer's defence was predictably impeccable, and Berdych completed few trips to the net that weren't laced with peril. All too often the Czech barely attained the service line before spinning to watch Ferrer's passing winner streak by. But mostly it was Ferrer darting forward and compelling his larger opponent to yield up the baseline, and to run, subjecting Berdych to an unending selection of vicious high-speed geometric puzzle that he proved ill-equipped to deal with. It was the most accomplished match I have seen from Ferrer since he so surgically dismembered Juan Martin del Potro at Wimbledon.

But would it all be for nothing? Just last week Ferrer managed to win two matches in the round robin phase in London's O2 Arena but was cruelly denied a place in the semifinals. Now in Prague's O2 he had flogged both Czech singles players, but was faced with the possibility that he might still lose the Davis Cup final. It had all come down to Almagro and Stepanek.

Either represented a vanishingly slender thread from which to suspend national hopes. Stepanek was in Prague on his preferred surface, but was also playing his third best-of-five match in three days, and he was almost thirty-four years old. Indeed, no man over thirty had won a decisive fifth rubber in a final exactly one hundred years. Meanwhile Almagro's capacity to under-perform in crucial matches had been the endlessly-iterated theme of the weak. The fifth rubber of a Davis Cup final is a crucible and the man who wins is invariably the man who can retain his shape the longest. Could he somehow replicate Viktor Troicki's unlikely feat from 2010, and stand firm in the face of an experienced opponent who wouldn't stop coming at him?

Visually, neither man could realistically claim the honours. Almagro's pink shirt had long since shed its *España* patch, which only the congenitally unpoetic failed to read as symbolic, while his shoes looked like he'd forded a shallow stream of salmon dip. Meanwhile Stepanek's blue shirt sustained the rich Czech tradition of producing history's most hideous tennis wear, a tradition that stretches back at least to Ivan Lendl. (Lendl was there, incidentally, and looked on approvingly.) With its extravagant leonine heraldry, it scored highly for patriotism even as it uneasily reminded us that sanity is only ever contingent.

The match got off to a shaky start, but before too long settled into a steady pattern of Stepanek attacking and Almagro barely holding on. It is hard to think that, as predicted, the occasion hadn't gotten to Almagro. Character is indeed destiny. He was unusually passive, but then part of his make-up is that despite being a gifted shotmaker he can stop going for his shots when the going grows tight, unlike, say, Marcos Baghdatis, who keeps going for them but misses. Given the wave of support that Stepanek was bodysurfing – he was relentless – it was in a way admirable that Almagro held on as long as he did, until, at crucial times, he didn't. The second set provides a particularly good example. After they'd traded early breaks, Almagro finally forced his way a tiebreaker with his best tennis of the match so far. From there he disappeared almost entirely, and failed to trouble the scorer, although the stats guy in charge of unforced errors was kept busy.

The third set was certainly Almagro's boldest passage of play, and hope or dread kindled at the prospect of an audacious comeback from two sets down, depending on your proclivities. Surely Stepanek was now tiring. It was hard to tell. He was certainly endeavouring to shorten the points, but he's been doing that for years on nearly every point. His work around the net remained consistently excellent, and this consistency began to wear his opponent down to nothing in the fourth, although Almagro, with feathery irony, did save one match point with an angled backhand volley of his own. He

couldn't save the second. The Davis Cup was sealed with one last Almagro error, his 56th of the afternoon, and Stepanek collapsed to the court. The captain Jaroslav Navrotil arrived to crush him shortly after, followed immediately by the mullet he has cultivated since the Czechs last won the Davis Cup. Before long the rest of the squad were there, and piled atop each other in the approved manner.

Speaking of irony, it was a quite delicious moment when Berdych of all people, amidst the team celebrations that were gaining a fearsome internal momentum, interrupted Stepanek – who'd taken to vaulting the net – and reminded him to go and shake the hands of the assembled Spanish team. Both the Czech players have had a memorable year when it comes to handshakes. That will definitely be what they remember 2012 for. Stepanek then shredded his special lion shirt, providing an image fated to remain with the rest of us for some years to come.

I won't pretend to have seen all hundred Davis Cup finals that have so far been contested, but I'll submit that this one would not look out of place beside the best of them. It featured just about everything one might have hoped for (unless you are Spanish, in which case you would feasibly have hoped for more Rafael Nadal, without whom the Spaniards are merely very good, as opposed to unbeatable). The heroic Ferrer did a lot, but he couldn't do everything. He might have even done enough to stop pedestrian commentators telling us how underrated he is, despite the fact that they're only ones saying it.

Nor should we forget the central doubles rubber, in which Stepanek and Berdych defeated the reigning Tour Finals champions in Marc Lopez and Marcel Granollers, proving once more that the top doubles players aren't necessarily the best doubles players. This in turn reminds us that the Czech Republic won the 2012 Davis Cup with only two players. Berdych and Stepanek contested every live rubber in 2012, in singles and doubles. It also fittingly caps the most successful possible year for Czech team tennis. In 2012 they have won the Davis Cup, the Federation Cup, and the Hopman Cup. It's a lot to bear in mind, and it's conceivable that 2012 won't be remembered for missed handshakes after all.

Conclusion

How the Life Goes On

It is several weeks shy of one year since I was last in this situation, mind murmuring in torpid contemplation of the tennis season just past. The fifty intervening weeks have wrought change on my life, such that I'm now sitting in a different café in a different part of Melbourne, watching a slightly different version of the world swirl and eddy through the pollen-choked air. This edition of Spring hasn't sprung so much as enveloped, a vast pulviscular blanket that first clogs your nose and eyes, then before long your brain. The wind is a slight northerly, although for a rarity it carries no threat of heat. My coffee is a shade too strong, and I am well past the age when I believed a taste for strong coffee (or high chili-tolerance) proved anything of worth to anyone that matters. But I know that I'll order another when this one is done, and that I won't ask for it to be weakened. If I wanted things prepared just so, I'd stay at home. Nevertheless, thanks to the twin miracles of pollen and caffeine, my mind murmurs at a higher and less useful pitch than usual. The café is playing an Italian version of 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da' – '*La la, come la vita va avanti!*' – which isn't helping. But that's the soundtrack we have, so try to keep it in mind while you read.

The end of the tennis season marks the point at which professional tennis players and those who enjoy talking about professional tennis mostly part ways for a time.¹⁶ Some players are clearly addicted to the attention, however, and haven't been able to endure a week without resorting to social media. Their messages, almost without exception, are dull beyond belief. Astoundingly, it turns out lots of them are training. David Ferrer may or not be in Istanbul. Radek Stepanek might finally have retired to bed. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga has hopefully been in touch with Gael Monfils to ask if the latter ever hit upon a reliable method of translating Roger Rasheed into English. Monfils, according to Twitter, is in Paris, again. Nadal has returned to the practice court, which *is* news.

Still others are using their off-season to partake in exhibitions, including some who'd lobbied tirelessly to have their break extended. Last time round I called these events 'low-brow vaudeville for very good causes', and right this moment I can't think of a better description. As with so much in tennis, exhibitions remind me that finding professional tennis players even remotely funny requires one selectively to forget that professional funny people are doing far more amusing things elsewhere. Mostly it merits a bemused smile. Andy Roddick doing impressions of other players in Toronto the other

¹⁶ Of course, there are plenty of Challenger players for whom the season hasn't ended at all.

night was held to be a comedic coup, but I couldn't see that it held a candle to either Billy Connolly or Tim Minchin performing live at the Royal Albert Hall. Readers will doubtless come up with other comedians they prefer. But if Roddick or Djokovic number among your favourites I'll hazard you need to watch less tennis.

Tennis in this sense is something of a sealed microcosm, and cloyingly self-referential, but it's far from the worst offender. It does better than Classical music, a field in which Mozart's *Ein musikalischer Spaß* gets them rolling in the aisle, or in which people believe adapting bawdy verse to a symphonic masterpiece constitutes a fabulous gag. (I doubt whether many orchestral musicians can hear the waltz from Tchaikovsky's Fifth without humming 'Once I was a virgin, now I am a whore . . .') But the point is the same. When one spends too much time focussing tightly on one thing, a realistic perspective is the first thing to go. The tennis off-season grants everyone who needs it a good month in which to regain a sense of proportion. It is an invitation that many of us nonetheless refuse to take.

After all, for those who presume to write about tennis the busy season has now arrived. We now have a clear month in which to look searchingly back on the last eleven. Only here in the southern hemisphere is the summary season especially summery, but no one anywhere is immune to this urge towards retrospective. Who can resist the temptation to repackage the season just ended into a seemingly endless torrent of self-generating list-based articles? Not me.

The helpful poltergeist trapped in my iPhone informs me that the air outside is 20.1C, which to a Cayman Islander is approximately 68.2F. I've now finished my second coffee, which was if anything stronger than the first, and produced an effect on my brain not unlike that which the US Air Force once visited upon the forests of northern Laos: my mind feels comprehensively defoliated, and unfit for human habitation. The café's sound system has exhausted its impressive repertoire of Beatles covers.

It launches into an Italian bossa nova version of 'What's New, Pussycat', which is conceivably an improvement over the original. Suddenly energised, I start to compile a list of the top ten matches played this year. And did you see that Novak Djokovic took to the court against Gustavo Kuerten while wearing a curly wig? Priceless. Let the summary season commence.

Masters Retrospective

The moment came just after Shanghai. With eight of the season's allotted nine Masters 1000 events completed, it looked for all the world as though the ATP's premier tournaments would be claimed exclusively by the sport's top four players, an outcome that wasn't rendered less astonishing by the fact that this is precisely what happened last year. Even as one couldn't believe that the same quartet just kept on winning, an alternative winner grew increasingly difficult to pick, or even imagine; a clear reminder that when a trend goes on long enough it can come to feel both mundane and amazing at the same time.

As it so often does, the Paris Indoors provided the exception. The last time someone outside the top four won a Masters was also in Paris, in 2010, when Robin Soderling triumphed as the world No.5. This time around it was won by David Ferrer, who is also ranked No.5. It says a lot that the world's fifth best player winning a Masters tournament constitutes a shock result. Precisely what it says will depend on one's opinion of the current era.

BNP Paribas Open, Indian Wells

Winner: Roger Federer

As a virulent gastric bug replicated its way through greater Palm Springs, the theme of the week was vomit, with the consensus being that too much of it was emerging from the mouths of professional tennis players. The withdrawals mounted, and the story spread that there was something wrong with Roger Federer, who'd turned a worrying shade of green. Andy Murray fell to a momentarily resurgent Guillermo Garcia-Lopez, kindling fears of yet another post-Melbourne slump. Rafael Nadal and David Nalbandian fought out the finest match of the tournament, one that the Argentine's fans may never forgive him for not closing out.

Stomach bugs gave way to hardware glitches in the later rounds, and a Hawk-eye malfunction ruptured Juan Martin del Potro's brain for an entire set. Then bugs gave way to a gale as storms swept over the desert. John Isner, the latest great hope for American tennis, served through the wind to inflict Novak Djokovic's second loss of the year in a third set tiebreak, and in doing so progressed to his first Masters final. Federer and Nadal met in a semifinal that played out exactly unlike everyone predicted, with Federer storming through as though his end of the court was untroubled by the merest zephyr. He defeated Isner comfortably in the final.

Sony Open Tennis, Miami

Winner: Novak Djokovic

Desert gave way to swamp, and straight-laced southern Californians gave way to a Latin carnival. Grigor Dimitrov upset Tomas Berdych, proving that he's ready to mix with the big boys, a contention he then spent months disproving. Andy Roddick played his best match in years to upset Federer, ensuring their career head-to-head would never attain a twenty match differential. Any hopes that he'd finally turned a corner were undone when he was subsequently bagelled by Juan Monaco, riding a wave of 'local' support. Monaco then defeated Mardy Fish, in what would prove to be the American's last competitive match for half the season. David Ferrer dismantled del Potro in a way that was startling at the time but has since been revealed as the norm.

Djokovic was looking patchy, but hadn't dropped a set, even against Marcos Baghdatis, although he afterwards celebrated as though he'd triumphed 12/10 in the fifth. Nadal and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga proved yet again that a long tight match doesn't have to be a good one. After winning, Nadal's knees withdrew, leaving the rest of him no choice but to go along. This gifted Murray his second walkover of the event, and propelled him into the final. Talk of the post-Melbourne slump was forgotten. Suddenly it was all about the Murray-Djokovic rivalry. Then Djokovic won a low-grade final comfortably, thereby defending his title. It wasn't much of a rivalry, yet.

Monte-Carlo Rolex Masters, Monte Carlo

Winner: Rafael Nadal

The interest, as the clay season hit its stride, was the condition of Nadal's knees, and whether they would be able to withstand another round of blows from Djokovic. Further interest was provided by the tournament's decision to install a pot hole behind the landward baseline, which crippled Monaco and Julien Benneteau. It got even more interesting – if that's the term – when Djokovic's grandfather died the day before his second round match against Alexandr Dolgoplov, leading to speculation about whether he'd play. He did, and he won, just.

Nadal encountered barely any resistance on the way to the final, except from Gilles Simon of all people, who'd apparently saved up a whole season's worth of aggressive play for that one match. The final was billed as the ultimate showdown between Nadal and Djokovic, the first time they'd met on clay since Rome the year before, or anywhere since the Australian Open in January. Would the world No.1 continue to dominate the Spaniard in finals? As it happened, Nadal won so easily that even his staunchest fans felt

that nothing had been resolved either way. Grief had reduced Djokovic to a shadow. Still, it was a record eighth consecutive Monte Carlo title for Nadal, and really you take them however they come. By winning Nadal again moved to the top of the all-time Masters title leader-board. But all the same, the sense of unfinished business was pervasive.

Mutua Madrid Open, Madrid

Winner: Roger Federer

And so we came to the blue dirt in the magic box. It is difficult to overstate just how controversial this was at the time, and how thick and fast the doomsday proclamations came. It was going to ruin preparations for Roland Garros. The blue clay, which otherwise resembled nothing more lethal than laundry powder, was so dangerous that it might as well be laced with anthrax. Ion Tiriach was the devil incarnate. It was the end of days. I quite liked it although I grew weary of the way every ailment suffered by any player in the ensuing weeks was reliably traced back to Madrid, including gastric afflictions, sore shoulders, and general *Weltschmerz*.

Federer overcame Raonic in a high-quality fast-court first round. By thrashing Davydenko, Nadal foolishly invited his fans to relax their guard, which meant his subsequent maiden loss to Fernando Verdasco struck with the force of a sledgehammer blow. A testy Djokovic fell to Janko Tipsarevic. Berdych and del Potro played a fine, aggressive semifinal. Federer eventually overcame Berdych in a tremendous and tight final, earning a framed suit from Will Smith, a temporary return to the top two, and the right to be dubbed the 'blue clay greatest of all time' (BC GOAT). Earlier in the week Djokovic and Nadal delivered separate ultimatums that it was blue clay or them. There won't be blue clay in La Caja Magica next year. I'm sure there's no connection.

Internazionali BNL d'Italia, Rome

Winner: Rafael Nadal

Fears that Madrid's blue clay would prove catastrophically disruptive turned out to be unfounded when the last four standing in Rome the following week were Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer and David Ferrer, the four most accomplished clay courtiers of recent years, and who would go on to populate the Roland Garros semifinals a few weeks later. Tomas Berdych played his new heart out against a near-perfect Nadal, and lost four and five. Andreas Seppi and Stanislas Wawrinka slogged through a three-quarter pace twilight classic on Court Pietrangeli, with the Italian saving six match points and sending the locals perilously close to a rapturous riot.

Civil unrest was certainly in the air by the final weekend, when foul weather and an extravagant collapse from Li Na combined to postpone the men's final. The final itself was the anticipated rematch between Nadal and Djokovic. Without bereavement to muddy the issue, Nadal's straight sets triumph proved that he is after all the best clay courter in the world. I cannot recall why it had been in doubt.

Rogers Cup, Toronto

Winner: Novak Djokovic

The Olympics always wreaks havoc on the tennis calendar, and this year poor Toronto bore the worst of it, coming at the tail end of a dense passage of tournaments that included Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the London Games. Gold medallist Andy Murray turned up, had his cake, ate it, and then took off. Djokovic's sternest test came against the resurgent Tommy Haas. Milos Raonic had a court temporarily rededicated to him, but fell to John Isner in a quarterfinal that amazingly featured a lot of unreturned serves. It also rained a lot, which didn't help to attract the fans that were already staying away in droves.

Richard Gasquet was the surprise of the week, defeating Berdych, Mardy Fish and Isner en route the final, just his third at this level in seven years, or in 26 years, depending on how you slice it. 'To ribbons' was how Djokovic sliced him in the final, winning comfortably three and two.

Western & Southern Open, Cincinnati

Winner: Roger Federer

The match of the tournament was Haas' match-point-saving first round tussle with David Nalbandian, whose inability to take a trick since Queens was starting to look eerily like karma. Brian Baker finally won a match on US hardcourts, from just his fifth attempt. Fish played the best match of his health-afflicted year against Federer - a wonderful fast-court display. Raonic was excellent in taking out Berdych, but was upset by Wawrinka. Juan Martin Del Potro's left wrist packed up, but he toiled through to the semifinals, which he contested mostly one-handed. This turned out to be too few hands with which to realistically challenge Djokovic.

As top seeds, Djokovic and Federer had collision course written all over them, which unfortunately contravened their existing sponsorship agreements. Neither dropped serve on the way to the final. Then Federer broke Djokovic three times in twenty minutes - all

with one hand - and he was well on the way to taking his fifth Cincinnati crown in straight sets, again equalling the Masters title tally.

Shanghai Rolex Masters, Shanghai

Winner: Novak Djokovic

Positioned cruelly in the post-US Open hangover period, Shanghai is often beset by scheduling issues. Even when top players turn up, they don't really turn up to play. But this year's edition was very good. Matthew Ebden's year of living large ended when he failed to defend last year's quarterfinal, while Bernard Tomic's year of giving up continued unchecked, this time against Florian Mayer. The stand-out performers were Haas and Radek Stepanek, who set the event alight with quarterfinal runs, though their veteran status spared them from being prosecuted for arson. When you're over thirty-two you're permitted to set one venue alight per year, but no more. It's in the ATP Rulebook, somewhere near the back.

Federer's hopes of finishing the year at No.1 realistically ended at the rough hands of Murray in the semifinals - a near-perfect display from the Scot. Berdych meanwhile found Djokovic utterly impenetrable, and admitted as much after the match. The final between Murray and Djokovic was one of the finest and most dramatic matches played this year, as these inherently defensive players proved that given ideal conditions and sufficient incentive, they can belt the ball as lustily as anyone. Djokovic saved a handful of match points in the second set, before pulling away from a flagging Murray in the third. It was the Serbian's thirteenth Masters title (eighth in the last two seasons) and all but guaranteed him the year end top ranking.

BNP Paribas Masters, Paris

Winner: David Ferrer

If Toronto was reduced by an Olympic year, then poor Paris was all but dismembered by a deliberately abbreviated one. In the long term this is a trickier issue to address. With no buffer between it and the World Tour Finals [Barclays] the following week, there was always going to be a question of commitment from the top guys. To no one's surprise, defending champion Federer pulled out, citing a knee injury (presumably sustained in Madrid). Djokovic went out to the tournament's early surprise, Sam Querrey. Astonishingly, it was only Djokovic's second loss before the semifinals for the entire year. Janko Tipsarevic meanwhile seized his chance to further augment the most comprehensive retirement resume in the sport, blaming 'sudden fatigue' as he pulled out while his opponent served for it. Many onlookers experienced sudden scepticism. The

Parisian crowd delivered sudden boos. It is apparently a structural requirement of the event that at least one Frenchman makes an audacious deep run. This year they were two: Michael Llodra and Gilles Simon.

The tournament's late surprise was the utterly unheralded Jerzy Janowicz, who first qualified, then saw off no fewer than *five* top twenty players en route to the final (Philipp Kohlschreiber, Marin Cilic, Murray, Tipsarevic and Simon), which propelled his own ranking some 43 places higher. He'll now be *seeded* for the Australian Open next month. In the final he discovered Ferrer, who had never won a Masters title and wasn't about to let this chance go by unseized. The Spaniard's triumph was acute, unlikely and perfect. You've hardly seen a happier man.

In the end Ferrer and Janowicz contrived to transform a potential dreary end to the season into a truly memorable one. But Bercy remains a problem that needs to be addressed. There's a sensible proposal to move it to February, which would in turn lend that month some much needed coherence. But this would mean that six of the nine Masters would be contested before Roland Garros. The best way to fix that would be to move one of the others, and play it on grass.

The Trimmings of Objectivity

It didn't take long for my innocent intention to write about the best tennis matches of 2012 to be revealed as dewy-eyed naivety. It was supposed to be simple, but rapidly came to feel reductive, if not intrinsically dishonest. The more I looked at it, the less I could see, and the less worthwhile the task became. All the same, if you are interested in seeing the list I did eventually arrive at, you can skip to the end. But if you're more interested in why the Australian Open final isn't on it, please read on.

To say that one's choice of the match of the year is fundamentally subjective is to say barely anything at all. Presumably no one believes such opinions are earthed in hard science, especially since attempts at a scientific method usually yield results that are either laughable or useless, if not both. To add that a subjective choice still relies upon commonly accepted criteria is to say only a little more. After all, 'subjective' doesn't mean 'arbitrary'. There are particular characteristics that most good matches share – context, quality, and drama – and all must be present for any match to be adjudged great. It's hardly a coincidence that each season sees broad consensus on what the 'match of the year' actually was.

On the other hand, to insist that this season featured no truly great matches is to say a lot. I realise I am courting controversy here. There were certainly great moments, and there were some very long matches, but only a die-hard Wagnerian would insist that these constitute the primary ingredients for immortality. And I realise such an assertion risks dampening the post-seasonal mood, which is one of ecstatic retrospection. Even as the season progressed certain orthodoxies emerged as to which matches were or were not great. Regardless of one's innermost proclivities it grew hard to deviate from this orthodoxy without appearing wilful, not to say perverse.

The Australian Open final remains the best example of this. The view was aired even as the match was grinding to its eventual end that we were all witnessing the greatest tennis match ever played. Within the hour – and for those of us sharing a time zone with the players this hour was very late – that view was revised to the greatest Major final ever played. Certainly it was the longest, and probably the most disabling for its participants. Bobbing fitfully amongst the inevitable flood of military metaphors was the term 'epic'.

However, in the days following the match simple calculations revealed that the match wasn't merely epic, it was considerably more epic than it needed to be, and that had the players confined themselves to the allotted time between points the match would have concluded almost an hour earlier. Beyond that, the tenor of the match was cautious rather than audacious. It was an encounter in which two of the supreme athletes in our sport trusted their legs more than their shot-making. Indeed, it mostly felt uncannily like the first three sets of their US Open final the year before, until Djokovic's injury had caused him to go after his shots, which in turn inspired the happy discovery that a point could end with a winner even before it reached thirty-five strokes. Sadly by Melbourne this lesson had been forgotten.

Nevertheless, the view persists that this is the match of the year, which leads me to wonder just how of the people who've ranked it so highly have bothered to watch it a second time. I *have* gone back and watched it, and I can attest that it is indeed very long, but that until about halfway through the fifth hour, barely anything notable happens, kind of like *Einstein On The Beach*, only more martial and twice the length. In that sense it was an epic. It was downright Wagnerian, although by sitting through it twice I've done better than Rossini managed with *Lohengrin*.¹⁷ If my match of the year list was to be entirely of my own choosing, I don't think this final would make it into the top ten.

¹⁷ 'One cannot judge Lohengrin after a first hearing, and I certainly don't intend to hear it a second time.' - Gioachino Rossini, displaying a Churchillian gift for pithy insult.

I suspect that most who write about tennis maintain two discrete lists. The first is an *official* match of the year list, which is heavily lacquered and decorated with all the trimmings of objectivity. Notwithstanding the odd quirky pick to establish the writer's credentials as free spirit, these official lists are largely interchangeable with each other. This is the list that I'd set out to compile but eventually gave up on. I would have felt obliged to rank the Australian Open final somewhere near the top. The second, less visible list outlines one's *favourite* matches played each year. In both cases it is never possible to expunge all trace of favouritism, but it is still worth the effort to try. I like to think you can get close, which makes it hard for me to include, say, James Blake thrashing Marcel Granollers at the US Open, even though I'd love to.

For myself, I generally favour attacking tennis, although I am more than partial to desperate and virtuosic defence when the situation calls for it. This in turns means that, all else being equal, I will appreciate a match of contrasting styles more than one whose texture remains constant throughout. The structural advantage of attacking tennis is that the attacking player forces his opponent to defend, and thus generates that stylistic contrast. I would therefore rank Nadal's excellent Australian Open quarterfinal victory over Tomas Berdych higher than his loss to Novak Djokovic in the final. The final arguably has it covered for atmosphere, but the quarterfinal featured far more interesting and enterprising tennis from both men. Nadal's defence in the semifinal against Roger Federer was also unworldly, especially on his forehand, which was lethally unapproachable. Consequently, I'd also rank that match over the final.

Context also counts for a lot. The unabashed Andy Murray cheer squad that Sky Sports persists in calling a commentary team were quick to anoint the US Open final as the greatest match ever played. I think they first delivered this judgement about four games in. Given the moment, their enthusiasm was hard to begrudge even as it was easy to mock, especially when it was replaced by a consuming dread as Djokovic recovered the two set deficit. Without question it was a dramatic match, and for historical value it's hard to top. But the weather was truly horrible, and at best we can say that the standard was exceptional given the prevailing conditions. It's definitely high on my list of matches played in a cyclone. But Murray and Djokovic proved the following month in Shanghai just how fine their tennis can be when it isn't tempest tossed. They'd already proved it back in Melbourne, in what probably *was* the match of the year, but then disproved it in Dubai and Miami. It's a confusing rivalry, as these things go.

Anyway, here is a list of my favourite matches from 2012, in a very approximate order. There are at least a dozen other matches I could add, including, of course, the Australian Open final. The more I think about it, the more matches I think merit inclusion, and the

more I'd like to reshuffle those that are already there. There were plenty that were good in 2012, even if none were truly great.

13. Berdych d. Almagro, Davis Cup Final, 6/3 3/6 6/3 6/7 6/3

Berdych puts his tennis where his mouth is, barely, but a gallant Almagro somehow never loses faith.

12. Murray d. Djokovic, US Open Final, 7/6 7/5 2/6 3/6 6/2

Excellent tennis given the appalling conditions, and a resonant and momentous result.

11. Nadal d. Berdych, Australian Open Quarterfinals, 6/7 7/6 6/4 6/3

Nadal barely saves the second set, then lifts to trample Berdych.

10. Kohlschreiber d. Paire, US Open, 6/7 6/3 3/6 6/2 7/6

High drama, absurd shot-making, and a pair of headcases.

9. Seppi d. Wawrinka, Rome Third Round, 6/7 7/6 7/6

Seppi saves six match points, breaks Wawrinka's heart, and sends the home fans into a prolonged swoon.

8. Djokovic d. Tsonga, French Open Quarterfinals, 6/1 5/7 5/7 7/6 6/1

Heartbreak for Tsonga, failing to take any of his many match points. Djokovic's courage when on the brink is unparalleled.

7. Ferrer d. Tipsarevic, US Open Quarterfinals, 6/3 6/7 2/6 6/3 7/6

Outstanding offence and defence from both, as the indefatigable Ferrer recovers from a break in the fifth.

6. Federer d. Berdych, Madrid Final, 3/6 7/5 7/5

All-out assault on the slick blue clay. Federer narrowly prevails over a rampant Berdych.

5. Rosol d. Nadal, Wimbledon Second Round, 6/7 6/4 6/4 2/6 6/4

A combined winner to unforced error count of 106-45, as the lowly Rosol continues blasting, and somehow doesn't miss.

4. Djokovic d. Murray, Shanghai Final, 5/7 7/6 6/3

Two sets of immense quality, with Djokovic saving match points, then running over the tiring Murray.

3. Haas d. Nalbandian, Cincinnati First Round, 6/7 7/6 6/3

Outstanding all-court play and drama from two veterans who are proven masters at both.

2. Federer d. Del Potro, Olympic Games Semifinals, 3/6 7/6 19/17

Del Potro's finest effort on grass, defying predictions of a Federer cakewalk. Absorbing from start to finish.

1. Djokovic d. Murray, Australian Open Semifinal, 6/3 3/6 6/7 6/1 7/5

Probably the best match of the year. Murray's desperate fight in the fifth almost rectifies his tactical tank in the fourth.

There Has Been Only One

Last year there were ten players (all men) who claimed their maiden titles on the ATP Tour, although history remains coy about what indignities they visited upon them after that. This year, in an outcome doubtless endorsed by immortal Scotsmen with suspiciously Continental accents, there has been only one. Ten to one is a precipitous drop, and as ever the temptation is not inconsequential to tease out an explanation. I'm certainly open to hearing one, especially if it hinges up a wild conspiracy, includes Sean Connery as an even less convincing Spaniard than Russel Crowe, and features a soundtrack by Queen.

Before I launch myself into a full-blown rhapsody on a theme of *Highlander* – ignoring the fact that this season's sole first-timer Martin Klizan hails from a part of Slovakia frustratingly near sea-level – I should indulge in some marginally more sane musings. If nothing else, it's worth mentioning that there were five first-time winners in 2010, and at the time this felt about right. Extending that, I can say that last year's ten felt like

over-abundance – one handful too many. The paucity of new champions this season can be considered a correction of sorts. Next year we'll have five, mark my words.

It's also interesting to note what occurred this year at the tournaments that last year produced a first time winner. In three of the cases, the person who won their first title in 2011 came back to defend it, which piques my interest more than winning it in the first place did. For the record these events were San Jose (Milos Raonic), Kitzbühel (Robin Haase) and Casablanca (Pablo Andujar). In the case of Haase and Andujar these remain their only successful venues, while Raonic added Chennai back in January. Again, I can't think of a good reason why this should be so, besides the well-worn idea that returning to the scene of your initial triumph is inspiring enough to propel you across the line again. (But if that's true, then why doesn't it happen more often? And when it does happen, how does it ever stop?)

Among last year's fistfuls of first-timers were Janko Tipsarevic and Florian Mayer, both of whom had achieved a modest portion of notoriety as the best players yet to win a title. There are worse things to be best at, and less savoury ways to be notorious. Given this, it was always a dicey proposition whether either man would trade their fame for the cheap quick thrill of claiming an actual tournament. Garish trophies are lovely, and the pay-checks are obviously superior, but the mantle of the premier also-ran can be worn for ever. Sadly, Tipsarevic and Mayer took the quick gratification. They were the best players who hadn't won a title. Now they're just a couple more dudes who have. Ho hum.

Their mantles currently weigh down the able shoulders of Julien Benneteau, for whom 2012 proved to be a career year in this as well as so many other respects. This is the fifth consecutive season in which he has finished runner-up in an event, without winning any. Not only that, he did it twice this year – Sydney and Kuala Lumpur – his best such showing since 2008. Benneteau is now a tour-leading 0-7 in finals, a statistic that only grows more impressive when we consider that he hasn't managed it twice at the same event, and that he has failed to win titles across a variety of surfaces. That suggests a calibre of versatility and persistence second to, well, many. Benneteau will soon turn 31 (significantly his birthday is three days after Beethoven's and five days before Jesus') and there is every chance that he'll be wearing that mantle forever. In his dotage it can be refashioned into a rather fetching knee-rug. It might calm his fevered bones as he reflects on the time he couldn't beat Jarkko Nieminen in Sydney, or the time he did beat Roger Federer in Bercy, but didn't at Wimbledon.

Nonetheless, at No.35 in the world Benneteau isn't the highest ranked man without a title. That honour currently falls to Jerzy Janowicz at No.26. However, Janowicz's ranking is brand-new, and heavily based on that audacious run to the Paris Indoors final a few weeks ago. He hasn't been around long enough to generate crippling expectations, or to develop a passion for nude spa-wrestling. He still has that new player aroma – car dealerships sell it in aerosol cans – and it'll be a few months before the internet learns to be disappointed in him. But Brian Baker can attest that the online community is nothing if not infinitely resourceful in its disapproval, and nothing at all like a community. Give it time.

The one man who did claim a maiden title in 2012 was Martin Klizan, who is also the first (lowland) Slovakian to do so since Dominik Hrbaty in 2004. Despite a patch of career-best form extending back to July – he knocked Tsonga out of New York on the way to the fourth round – Klizan had no real business taking the St Petersburg title given the effort he'd expended in the rather astonishing semifinal the day before, in which he eventually saw off Mikhail Youzhny over almost four hours.

But in the final he encountered the equally title-less Fabio Fognini, who has never been one to permit a clear incentive to work hard get in the way of his preference not to. To be fair, Klizan seemed less exhausted than he afterwards claimed to be, although given that the match barely exceeded an hour it was hard to tell. The decisive shot was Klizan's forehand, which he hits with the left hand (this is normal for left-handers), and which he kept hitting past Fognini, which failed to lighten the Italian's mood. There could be only one, and it turned out Klizan was it.

The Same New Balls

Now that Bernard Tomic has attained twenty years of age – a milestone that was as restrained in its celebration as it was devoid of homoeroticism – there are once again no teenagers ranked within the ATP's top one hundred, a shortcoming that has proved quite popular in recent times. Indeed besides Tomic there is only one twenty-year-old, although he doesn't share the Australian's penchant for canary yellow Ferraris.

Leaving one's taste in garish sports cars to the side, this remains a serious problem. The age at which a player first ascends to the top hundred correlates strongly to their future success. Of the 25 players who broke into the top hundred between 2001 and 2011, 20 went on to reach the top twenty, while 17 reached the top ten. Of course attaining the top hundred so young is no guarantee that you'll one day reach No.1, but failing to do so makes it all but certain that you won't. Of all the No.1 players since the rankings began,

only Patrick Rafter didn't reach the top hundred before his twentieth birthday, which explains why the party was a decidedly glum affair at which he refrained from stripping off and wrestling his mates. It's enough to make one wonder where the next top players are actually going to come from, or if they've even left the Juniors (there are some especially promising prospects in the class of '96).

In the meantime I'll confine my gaze to the youths who've already ensconced themselves in the top hundred. Given that an article summarising only Tomic and Ryan Harrison would be either too short or provide me with too much space in which to poke fun at them, I'll expand the selection to those young men who are old enough to purchase alcohol in the United States. I can justify this by saying that in the current climate twenty-one still looks very young. In David Goffin's case it looks downright embryonic. But it is still a largely arbitrary restriction, and I don't mean to imply that the most notable twenty-two-year-olds – Jerzy Janowicz, Guido Pella and Evgeny Donsky – aren't worth discussing. The number in brackets is each player's ranking at the start of the season.

Milos Raonic

Current Ranking: 13 (31)

Milos Raonic barely qualifies for inclusion in this survey insofar as his birthday falls only two days after Jesus', which will thereby propel him to the advanced age of twenty-two before the year is quite spent. He also stands out from this crowd for his tangible accomplishments, and for the way that in discussing him one isn't obliged to deploy a term like 'potential', let alone precede it with 'wasted'. This season he compiled a respectable 8-8 record against opponents ranked above him, and 37-12 against those below.

He has already won three tour titles, including two this year, reached several finals at 500 level, and beaten various top ten players, including a hobbled Andy Murray in Barcelona and a perfectly fine Murray in Tokyo. He saw off Tomas Berdych on a fast hardcourt, and Nicolas Almagro on clay. He also faced Roger Federer three times on three different surfaces, and on each occasion acquitted himself well in a narrow three-set defeat. There was also that marathon loss to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at the Olympics, 23/25 in the final set.

His strengths and weakness are easily grasped. His impenetrable serve is ably supported by a commensurate forehand, and he generally remains undaunted under pressure. On the other hand his movement is poor, his backhand can't do the things he tries to make

it do, and his returning is of a standard that makes tiebreaks feel inevitable. More subtly, I suspect he still hasn't quite worked out how to prepare for really big occasions in a really big venue. But he will. On the other hand, he won't convince me that anyone besides the French should wear Lacoste.

David Goffin

Current Ranking: 46 (174)

David Goffin has been kicking around for a couple of years, but it was during his excellent run to the fourth round at this year's Roland Garros that he established a broader appeal, first as he ended the career of Arnaud Clement, and then as he pushed Federer to four sets. While this provided Federer's innumerable fans with a measure of unwelcome anxiety – traditionally grounds for excommunication – all was forgiven when Goffin professed himself to be among his opponent's more ardent admirers, which earned him a cuddle at the net.

Although Goffin went 17-14 at ATP level, including a win over John Isner en route to the Valencia quarterfinals, he compiled a fairly healthy 44-25 record across all levels, including a pair of Challenger titles in Le Gosier and Orleans over a strong field. His game is built around light feet and great hands, offset by tremendously fine bone structure and a hairstyle straight out of *That '70s Show*, or contemporary Belgium. He rose almost 130 places over the course of this season, and it's a reasonably secure bet that he'll rise higher yet.

Grigor Dimitrov

Current Ranking: 48 (76)

Grigor Dimitrov remains tantalisingly close to a definitive breakthrough, as he has for several years now, although he continues to defy expectations that it will ever come all in one go. His biggest win this year came over Berdych in Miami, although he'd already acquitted himself well in Melbourne, taking Almagro to five sets. There was also that savage drubbing of Mardy Fish at the Hopman Cup, a few highly entertaining wins over Kevin Anderson in England, and over Julien Benneteau indoors. His best result came at Queens, where he fell in the semifinal to David Nalbandian in abhorrent conditions (and luckily before the blood rage took hold of the Argentine). He also reached the quarterfinals in Basel in fine style, especially in his straight sets victory over Viktor Troicki, which featured the officially endorsed shot of the year.

A blessed side-effect of Dimitrov's more regular appearances at the business end of tournaments is that we're increasingly spared the unrelenting comparisons to Federer. Apparently even commentators can tire of saying the same thing over and over. I'm as surprised as you are. It feels like Dimitrov now succeeds or fails more or less on his own merits, and references to 'Baby Federer' sound jarring and extraneous.

Bernard Tomic

Current Ranking: 52 (42)

It was always a long shot that Tomic would replicate his results from 2011, though there nonetheless remained a measured hope that he might compensate by playing well elsewhere, or at least by displaying some evidence of progress. What was a surprise was the extent to which his game stagnated, and how desultory he grew once the results ceased to flow. After January he did not beat a player ranked above him (0-14), and he is the only player on this list whose ranking failed to improve.

There was also confirmation of something many had suspected, which is that for all his undeniable talent, and immense racquet skills, his game will only trouble good players when they're having an off day, and that the very top players would need to suffer a catastrophic day indeed, which by definition they almost never do. There has been endless talk about his poor application in New York and Shanghai, as well as his more spirited efforts in Gold Coast rooftop spas, but for me the definitive moment came in Miami when he faced David Ferrer. Given the gap in experience between the two men, there was no shame in it being a mismatch. But the gap between them was a chasm, and it wasn't clear how Tomic might ever hope to bridge it.

Ryan Harrison

Current Ranking: 69 (79)

The first time I watched Ryan Harrison this year was from close range as he lost a practice set to Alex Bogomolov Jr the day before the Australian Open commenced. I next saw him the following afternoon as he wrenched a tough set from Murray in crippling heat, and looked for all the world like a different player, not merely from 2011 but from the day before. There was a maturity and boldness to his play that left everyone present in no doubt that he might have contrived a longer stay in Melbourne, had he only chosen his first-round opponent more wisely.

It would be unfair to say that the remainder of Harrison's season was entirely disappointing, although it mostly was. Those of his fans with whom I'm personally

acquainted have permitted their disappointment ample expression. Still, he reached three tour semifinals, although none occurred at an especially noteworthy event (San Jose, Eastbourne and Newport). More impressive was his run to the last sixteen in Indian Wells. All the same, Eastbourne forced him into the top fifty, while Newport pushed him to No.43, his highest ranking. Since then, however, he only won two matches, and they weren't consecutive. Interestingly, Harrison's overall record for the season stands at 23-25, but he is only 6-20 against players ranked higher than him, and 17-5 against those ranked lower. This suggests that, for now, his ranking looks about right.

He once insisted with special vehemence that he *really* hates to lose, with an earnestness that implied he'd invented the sentiment, as though no one has ever felt that strongly about it ever before. In other words, he sounded like a teenager. He has hopefully spent a year learning that the other guys don't enjoy losing any more than he does, and that those passions he'd assumed were unique are common. That's what growing up is.

Evgeny Kuznetsov

Current Ranking: 78 (222)

This time last year Evgeny Kuznetsov didn't attempt to qualify for the Australian Open, instead confining himself to Futures events in Russia and Egypt two of which he won. This time round he will gain a comfortable direct entry into the year's first major. This is despite compiling a 2-5 record on the main tour (with both wins coming against lower-ranked opponents in Umag), and owing entirely to an outstanding season on the Challenger circuit. In all he won four Challenger events, for a record of 42-13 at that level. After winning three in a row in September, he steeled himself for an actual ATP tournament in Moscow, and promptly lost in the first round. It was a similar story at both Roland Garros and Wimbledon, where he fought through qualifying only to exit in the first round, although I can well recall how desperately contested the loss to Florent Serra in London was.

I have to wonder just long he can maintain a ranking of No.78 without starting to compile results on the main tour. We saw a similar story play out with Cedrik-Marcel Stebe, who roared into the top hundred after winning the Challenger finals last year, but subsequently found the transition to the main tour overwhelming, and then fitfully subsided.

Five Great Years

Tommy Haas, No.21

As I write, Tommy Haas is losing amiably to Roger Federer at an exhibition in Sao Paulo, although he earlier proved beyond question that he is the Swiss player's superior as a dancer. He also demonstrated back in Halle that he could master Federer in a tour final, even one whose mood was almost as unbuttoned as an exo. The Halle title was arguably the high-point of an outstanding year for Haas, which saw him rise from No.205 to No.21, turn thirty-four, and remain, by his standards, injury-free (he only gave away two walkovers and one retirement). His assertion some time ago that he still has top-class tennis in him, and that he is determined still to be playing it when his daughter is old enough to appreciate it, seemed more than a little fanciful. However, I can attest that those who expressed scepticism can still number among the German's ardent admirers.

Halle aside, my favourite moment came when Haas was denied a wildcard into Roland Garros, so promptly qualified without dropping a set, and pushed through to the third round, at which stage he unfortunately discovered Richard Gasquet on that one day a year when the Frenchman forgets how to miss the court. For Haas, Paris continued a run of form that commenced in Munich, and would be sustained with only minor interruptions until the year's end. Along the way he defeated nine top 20 players, for only six losses. He'll be comfortably seeded in Melbourne next month. The other highlight was of course his 500th career victory, which came in Vienna, and for which he received a Fiat.

Certain though I am of Haas' daughter's unfettered precocity, I also hope she's rather slow on the uptake when it comes to her father's chosen sport, and that he might therefore hang around for a while yet.

David Ferrer, No.5

In 2012 David Ferrer won 76 matches, the most of any player on tour. He is ranked No.5, a position that he has transformed from being an abstract number into a kind of Hadrian's Wall dividing the top ten. Metaphorically, I can't quite decide whether he patrols this wall (which would thus permit me to unleash some of the requisite canine allusions), or whether he in fact *is* the wall. Against the four players above him he compiled a record of 1-9, with the lone victory against Murray at the French Open. Against those ranked below his record was 75-6, including 8-0 against those ranked between 6 and 10, including comprehensive wins over Juan Martin del Potro, some

gripping victories over Janko Tipsarevic, and thrashing Tomas Berdych in the David Cup final. He isn't the kind of player who has bad years, but this year was without doubt his best.

For all that I'm drawn to a complicated view of things, and generally resist easy categorisations, I admit I appreciate the way Ferrer so clearly and straightforwardly separates the top four from the rest. Despite finally claiming a Masters title, he doesn't belong among the truly elite. Yet nor is he the best of the rest. He is considerably better than the rest. This is especially true of the young players on the way up, in whom the mere sight of Ferrer's name near theirs in a draw must reduce them to desolation. Whether you're Tomic or Raonic or Janowicz, he is a wall that can be neither penetrated nor scaled. It's a shame for them, as it's a shame for everyone ranked below him, but for the rest of us there's something gratifying about it. We know where we stand with Ferrer, and he has worked tirelessly to ensure we know where everyone else stands, too.

Radek Stepanek, No.31

When Radek Stepanek and Leander Paes defeated the Bryan Brothers to claim the Australian Open doubles title, there was a real risk that advancing age and the opportunity to share his outlandish victory celebrations with a kindred spirit might see him become a full-time double specialist. This transition remains on the cards, even though Stepanek still claims his share of singles matches. Then again, if he never contests another singles match he probably won't care, since in the last one he played he defeated Nicolas Almagro in the fifth and deciding rubber of the Davis Cup final, securing it for the Czech Republic. In some ways, a year doesn't get better than that.

Sam Querrey, No.22

When Sam Querrey recovered from a first set disaster to inflict Novak Djokovic's only pre-semifinal loss in 2012, it was the culmination of an unlikely year for the American (although the extent to which the Serbian's fissured focus contributed was much debated, especially by those among Djokovic's 'fans' who'd prefer their man strategically tanked rather than honestly lost). It was a year in which a coaching change provided initial impetus, which was sustained across all surfaces, and in which confidence was derived wherever it could be found.

As this season commenced Querrey was ranked No.93, thanks to an injury-addled 2011. He then won just one match prior to Memphis in late February, where he reached the quarterfinals and thereby instigated a radical turnaround: he started losing in second rounds rather than the first. That's progress. The first real change came at the \$100K

Sarasota Challenger, where he survived a strong local field, and helpfully demonstrated why challengers remain a useful resource for struggling men who should be ranked higher but aren't.

Querrey is a typically American specimen in that his game is fashioned around a first serve and a forehand, although despite a sometimes striking resemblance to the Iron Giant he rarely transforms into a fearsome colossus. But he is atypical in his willingness to turn up for the European clay events, and then to actually perform well at them. He has even won an event on continental red dirt. He has also won one on grass that isn't Newport. This year's semifinal at Queens saw him arrive at Wimbledon ranked No.64, where he lost to Cilic in the second longest match in tournament history. An old hand at such matters, he made a suitable pile of hay during the early part of the US summer, including his third title over a sadly emaciated field in Los Angeles, which was wonderful for him but apparently a sufficient affront to the presiding powers that the event has been relocated to Columbia. Nonetheless, LA like Sarasota turned out to be precisely what Querrey needed. Sometimes you need to rediscover a winning feeling, and it doesn't matter who it's against. Sometimes beating Ricardas Berankis means that you'll later get a shot at Novak Djokovic.

Mikhail Youzhny's Beard, No.1

Mikhail Youzhny's earned his only trophy this year in Zagreb in February, where he became by some considerable margin the most magnificently bearded man to capture an ATP title this season. With minor alterations he sustained this facial thicket through to Roland Garros. Then he was shamefully and painfully dispatched by Ferrer. His pain was evident in the care with which he etched 'SORRI' into the clay, while the full extent of his shame only became clear when he turned up in Halle with a smooth – and thus mortified – chin. This was also bad news for the endangered species of vole now deprived of its habitat.

His beard has since returned, but has never regained its lumberjack-worthy lushness. Still, this probably explains why he wasn't invited to join Federer in South America, where a beard can seem provocatively revolutionary and, worse given that Gillette is footing the bill, like a terrible failure to stay on-message.

Not a Means, but an End

In 2011, for the first time in the Open Era, no male tennis player reached his first Grand Slam semifinal. In 2012 it happened for the second time. This means there hasn't been a

new face in the final four at a Major since the French Open in 2010, when both Tomas Berdych and Jurgen Melzer managed it. It goes without saying that this is the longest such gap in many decades. On the other hand, this year each of the Majors boasted a different winner – Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and Andy Murray – which is the first time this has happened since 2003. You may curb your wonderment by recalling that these four men also comprised all the finalists. The Big Four, and despite our best marketing efforts this term retains an Orwellian whiff, have hardly become less dominant. Like all tyrants, they'll never tire of tyranny, but at least they've grown a little more open to sharing amongst themselves.

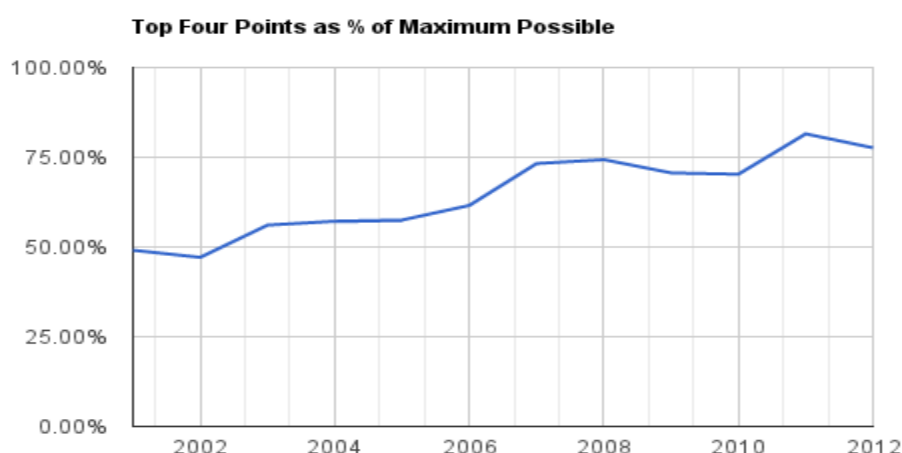
At the Masters level a minor revolution occurred only in the last week of the regular season, when David Ferrer defeated Jerzy Janowicz for the championship in Bercy. It was the first time a player ranked beyond the top four had claimed so august a title in precisely two years. Again, belay your astonishment. Now, as then, it was won by a world No.5 destined soon to rise higher. Indian Wells also had a maiden finalist in John Isner, but this led to nothing. The remaining eight Masters events were won by Federer (3), Djokovic (3) and Nadal (2). Meanwhile the last four at the Tour Finals included Djokovic, Federer and Murray, in addition to previous finalist Juan Martin del Potro, currently ranked No.7. There is no clear end to the repression.

Nadal of course hasn't played a competitive match since the second round at Wimbledon and one can be forgiven for assuming this would impact upon the Big Four's capacity to hoard most of the points. Each of the top four often maintains a stranglehold on his respective quarter of any tournament draw. They don't necessarily fill out the semifinals at every significant event, but they do manage it far more than at any other time in the sport's history. Nadal's withdrawal therefore left a fourth player with an opening. Initially this meant that Andy Murray percolated upwards to assume the third seeding, with Ferrer taking the fourth. After the US Open, at which Murray was triumphant, Nadal's ranking slipped to No.4, and Ferrer now took over his compatriot's seeding directly.

Interestingly enough, this has had only a marginal effect on the top four's relative dominance, despite Ferrer having his finest season yet. As a group, the top four accrued only slightly fewer points than they had in 2011, which was the most dominant season by so few elite players in history.

The following graph shows the top four's current aggregate points across all mandatory events (33,180) as a percentage of their maximum possible points (42,740 - derived from all four making at least the semifinals at every event). This is compared to the

same data going back to 2000, when the current Masters format was introduced. It gives a useful measure of elite dominance.



This data excludes the Olympic Games, largely for the sake of convenience, and because the points awarded to the medallists has not been consistent over the years. In any case, including the Games would not materially alter the results: by factoring in the Olympics, this year the top four claimed 77.78% of available points, compared to 77.63% without them.

There was a slight dip from last year, but it's difficult to see that Nadal's absence was the sole reason for it. Even healthy, it is unlikely he would have played either Canada or Bercy, and he traditionally hasn't performed strongly in Shanghai, Cincinnati or at the tour finals (especially with Spain contesting the Davis Cup final soon afterwards). The US Open is where the most points were conceded – Nadal reached the final in 2010 and 2011 – and they were lost to Ferrer, who reached the semifinal. Then again, Madrid was also a significant factor, even though Nadal was playing. Federer was the only player from the top four to reach the semifinals in the Magic Box. In any case, the upshot is that 2012 was the second most dominant season for the top four, despite Nadal missing half of it.

The main impact of Nadal's absence has been on his own ranking. He remains at No.4, but only barely: he is just 185 points ahead of Ferrer, and if he fails to reach the Australian Open final next month he will very likely tumble out of the top four for the first time in nearly eight years, even if Ferrer doesn't turn up. Given that turning up is one of the aspects of the sport at which Ferrer excels, and that Nadal hasn't contested a competitive match in six months, the likelihood of Nadal falling to No.5 is strong.

Also interesting from the above graph is the *lack* of change from 2003 to 2005, despite the seismic upheaval to the top of the men's game wrought first by the ascension of Federer in 2004, then of Nadal a year later. The explanation is that in 2003 the points were spread evenly across the top four (Roddick, Ferrero, Federer and Agassi), while the following year, the first of Federer's dominance, saw a far greater concentration at the top. This continued in 2005, when Nadal commenced his 160 week stint at No.2, and took most of his points from the Nos 3 and 4 (Roddick and Hewitt). But for all three years the aggregate points concentrated within the top four so only a minor rise.

Indeed, by using the same data we can see precisely how dominant the No.1 has been in a given year. The following graph shows the year-end No.1's points as a percentage of his maximum total points across all 'mandatory' events. This therefore shows how close the No.1 came to having a 'perfect' year.



This usefully demonstrates the sudden leap in 2004, but also reveals that this level of dominance has continued since, despite the increasing competition among the top three or four. For comparison's sake, we would have to go back to 1994-1995, which were the early years of Pete Sampras' reign, to find a commensurately dominant No.1. (However, given the more haphazard manner in which points were awarded back then the comparison is somewhat spurious.) It also demonstrates that Federer's 2006 is the most dominant year for a single player, at least given the metrics used here: that year he claimed over 75% of the total points he could have claimed at the biggest events.

This graph also shows us that Djokovic has been slightly less imposing this year than in 2011, which I'm pretty sure we already knew, and should be obvious from the fact that he spent almost half the season at No.2. The surprise, however, is that overall he hasn't been *that* much less dominant, which somewhat flies in the face of common wisdom, and

indeed seems almost counter-intuitive given the year Federer had. After all, last year Djokovic won three Majors and five Masters events. This year he only won one and three respectively. How can the numbers be so close? The explanation is that by reaching the final of Roland Garros, by winning the World Tour Finals undefeated and by performing strongly elsewhere, the world No.1 mostly off-set those other tournaments at which he failed to replicate last year's total mastery. He has put together one of the finest seasons in history, and he has managed to do it while winning 'only' one Major. The top four have shared plunder more equally than ever before, but Djokovic, once again, has proved that some players are just a little more equal than others.

Appendix A: Retiring Players

Remembering Gonzo

Fernando Gonzalez - not quite Chile's most successful player, but arguably its most admired - today announced his retirement from professional tennis, effective following the Miami Masters in April. His last few seasons have been heavily abbreviated by injuries, and he conceded that he no longer has the energy to compete at the highest level. Age, inevitably, has wearied him. He leaves the sport with 11 career titles, and an overall match record - so far - of 368-199 (.649).

I first watched Gonzalez play live at the 2002 Australian Open, when as a Qualifier he took out Tommy Robredo in straight sets. My initial impressions have barely altered upon many subsequent viewings. They are, in no definitive order: that his clothes seem unnaturally clean; that the ball makes a slightly different sound as it strikes his racquet than it does for most other players; that the trajectory of his backhand drives is unlike any other, and from close range feels like the lowest-percentage ground stroke in the sport; that he appears taller than the listed six feet; and that he is likely to erupt at any moment from the coin-toss onwards. Aside from the first point - he really is like a detergent ad - these seem to be the same impressions just about everyone has.

As with the personal impressions, I won't pretend my favourite moments from Gonzalez' career differ markedly from those of everyone else. It would be mere posturing to pretend that his most famous moments were not also his greatest, and would entail peddling the false idea that obscurity holds inherent value, when so often the reverse is true. Mining the Chilean's record reveals that he won Vina del Mar four times. It's possible he was majestic on each occasion, and especially the first, but I'd be lying to insist upon it. Alas, I did not witness that triumph, or the other three. However, I do know for a fact that the best match Gonzalez ever played was in the semifinal of the 2007 Australian Open, when he demolished Tommy Haas so completely that the German barely had time to abuse his coach, even if he was afterwards generous in blaming Gonzalez.

This match, which Gonzalez won 6/1 6/3 6/1 in 91 minutes, was the highest point in a high week, as he scaled a draw that was roughly analogous to the north face of the Eiger, although upon attaining the summit he discovered the most merciless Swiss peak of them all. Federer cleaned him up in straight sets, but it's important to remember that Gonzalez served for the first set. Had he served for it better, things might have been

different. He'd already taken out Nadal in straight sets in the quarterfinals, and the way he'd gone about it was profoundly revealing.

The standard word on Gonzalez is that he has one of the biggest forehands in tennis. Gael Monfils may hold the speed record (at something like 190 km/h), but Gonzalez is not far behind, and gets up there more consistently. Searching YouTube for 'Gonzalez forehand' yields no shortage of results. I'm not a very big fan of highlights clips, since among their panoply of distortions they tend to buttress the lazy assumption that great matches are merely the sum of their best shots. But in the case of Gonzalez it's not important. What's important is that thunderous, murderous forehand, although even here it's wise to remind ourselves that even so a mighty shot should not be unhooked from its purpose. It's a signature shot, but a signature without context is useless - it's just an autograph. Watching a highlights clip, it's forgivable to ask how Gonzalez ever lost a match, even as we remind ourselves that he never won a tournament that really mattered. I suppose what I'm saying is that if you're inclined to appreciate a ground stroke in isolation purely on its aesthetic merits - and if you *are* so inclined then Gonzalez' forehand might move you to tears - then you could do worse. But we're doing him a disservice if we suggest a forehand is all he has. Gonzalez always had plenty more going for him than that.

Indeed, all the talk as he tore through the Melbourne draw in January 2007 was of his backhand, and not the streaky, top spun version. The forehand was, naturally, decisive, but it was the Chilean's willingness to extend points with the sliced backhand, rather than end them with extreme prejudice, that provided the talking point. Under the presiding gaze of Larry Stefanki, the view gained currency that Gonzalez had finally gotten the balance right, tempering his volatility with patience, committing to defence as though it was actually a part of the sport. Nadal found him impenetrable, and lethal on anything short.

For whatever reason, it didn't last. He followed up his run to the Australian Open 2007 final with a season that we might generously term middling, although given his lofty top-eight ranking it was frankly worse than that. He failed to win a match in the North American summer. The measured patience of that Melbourne run turned out to be the strangest of anomalies - a lack of flash in the pan - and it would rarely, if ever, be seen again.

Which isn't to say he never again posted great results, though they were achieved by sprinting along a tightrope. For flair this is hard to top, but it means that a misstep is disastrous. Everyone remembers his 2009 French Open semifinal against Soderling for

the disputed line call in the fourth set, which culminated in Gonzalez clearing the mark with his bum. What is generally forgotten is how favoured the Chilean was for this match; higher ranked, a bone fide clay courter riding a four match winning streak against an opponent appearing in his first major semifinal. Gonzalez led 4/2 in the fifth. But he lost. It was tremendously entertaining, but he lost.

Sometimes, of course, he won, as with the utterly uncompromising 12-10 fifth set victory over Richard Gasquet in Melbourne a few years ago. It was electrifying, and all of us who saw it came away wondering why tennis can't always be played like this. The fact is, tennis can be played like this, but not for long, because opponents become harder to hit through in the later rounds. Gonzalez' solution to this has invariably been to hit harder. If ultimately it never proved effective on the most prestigious stages, it was never less than exhilarating. Tennis will lose one of its great personalities in April, but even now I cannot shake the belief that we could have been losing one of our great players.

The Careful American

The location is Rod Laver Arena. The situation is the semifinal of the Australian Open. The year is 2005. The month is January. It was a simpler time, and we all spoke in much shorter sentences. The protagonists are Andy Roddick and Lleyton Hewitt, who according to the official rankings are the second and third best tennis players on the planet. The American is irritated and fidgety. The Australian is florid-faced and sleeveless. The local crowd has been whipped to a patriotic lather by Alicia Molik's earlier victory in the final of the Women's Doubles, and by the presence of Olivia Newton-John and Shane Warne in Hewitt player's box. Our Lleyton breaks serve, and mimes starting a lawn mower. Roddick furiously adjusts his sleeves, which in his entire career have never once settled into an ideal position of their own accord. The noise is deafening. In the televised version, the commentators cross to Todd Woodbridge, seated in the stands, though nowhere near me. They ask him about the crowd noise. An expert at such things, Woodbridge confirms that it is indeed very loud.

After a year of decline, Hewitt had posted a resurgent year in 2004, one that saw him return to the top of the sport as a considerably more rounded player than he'd been when ranked No.1. At the top he discovered that his former whipping boy Roger Federer had elevated men's tennis to a frightening new level. Hewitt's 2004 had ended with pastings at Federer's hands in the finals of the US Open and the Masters Cup. He'd also been overpowered by Marat Safin in the Paris Indoors. The issue, for the hitherto modestly proportioned Australian, was one of power, and where he might find more of it.

With this in mind, and perhaps inspired by Brad Pitt's recent transformation in *Troy*, Hewitt had invested sufficient time in the gym that his jaws now had biceps. His biceps looked like thighs. This was his response to the challenge that Federer had laid down, but appeared incapable of losing. Others had different responses.

Roddick, for example, went the other way. Serve aside, he commenced a long retreat from power and risk, a rear-guard action against the assertive and optimistic style that initially propelled him to the top ranking and a US Open title. He very gradually fashioned himself into a defensive baseliner, for all that he'd never been an especially accomplished defender. Opinion remains divided over whether he was right to do this. Some insist that this measured approach – in which half-paced rallying was periodically punctuated by suicidal forays at the net – kept him in the top ten for many years. They're probably right. We had assumed that his erstwhile exuberance was natural, but whether it was or not, Roddick set about tempering it so that he might more reliably continue to defeat those ranked below him, even as it meant he was less equipped to challenge those ranked higher. It seemed like a strategy tailored to keep him in the top ten, but not the top five, and it worked. This seems borne out by the fact that every one of Roddick's deep runs at Majors after 2007 felt unlikely, as did his visits to the finals of Indian Wells and Miami in 2010.

Others insist that while continued aggression would have produced wild fluctuations in his ranking, he might have won more of the events that matter most. The peaks would have been higher, even if the valleys were deeper. I am partial to this theory. Would Safin have traded his second Major – this very 2005 Australian Open – for greater consistency? I doubt it. I'm not the first to suggest Roddick might have won a second Slam had he only realised he had less to lose than it seemed. Now that he has retired from the sport, contemplating his career mostly leaves me with a vague sadness at what might have been had he been willing to risk more.

Roddick vigorously thrust his way into public consciousness in 2001 by beating defending champion Pete Sampras in Miami. Suddenly everyone was talking about his serve, among the biggest and strangest anyone had ever seen, although level heads knowingly suggested that his right shoulder would inevitably detach within a few years, since there's no way that motion could be sustained. When we weren't talking about his serve we were talking about the forehand with which he backed it up. Sampras had demonstrated for over a decade that the limitations inherent in a style based around devastating serve-forehand combinations backed up by world-class athleticism weren't especially limiting when done right. Roddick looked to be the apotheosis of that style. His serve was bigger, and his forehand, while less astonishingly explosive on the run,

seemed just about as potent. The future of American's men's tennis looked fairly well assured, on the slim chance that his shoulder didn't tear clean off, and assuming he ever learned to volley.

It was this game that swept him through the US Summer in 2003, cleaning up in Montreal, Cincinnati and New York. In the US Open final he dismantled the new No.1 Juan Carlos Ferrer in three very straight sets, although he'd been exceedingly fortunate to survive David Nalbandian in the semifinal. Roddick would go on to finish 2003 as the world's No.1 player.

Even by Wimbledon the following year, when he and Federer met in the final, Roddick's name remained a by-word for reckless attack. He also had a beard, which I thought suited him. Asked beforehand how he thought the final would play out, Roddick remarked that Federer would no doubt employ considerable variety, all-court artistry and grass-court nous, while he himself would just go out and try to beat the crap out of the ball, or words to that effect. That's how it played out, and Roddick managed to overwhelm the defending champion for a set and a half. Ultimately it didn't quite work - 'I threw the kitchen sink at him but he went to the bathroom and got his tub' - but that was no reason to think he was on the wrong track. Indeed, he confessed that he took heart from how he'd taken it to the world No.1, and that only a few points here or there had decided things. Nevertheless, it was from around this time that a different, more circumspect Roddick began to emerge, even if it's tricky to pinpoint the precise moment when he gave up on beating the crap out of the ball. It's tempting to think there was one crucial loss too many.

Certainly by the Australian Open of the following year he was playing with greater margin. Hewitt's absurdly enhanced musculature enabled him to mostly out-hit Roddick from the baseline in their semifinal, although to be fair the American wasn't at his best. But it was still interesting to see, since it ran counter to everything I thought I knew about the American's game. I was startled by how 'not-hard' he was hitting the ball. 'Not-hard' was a usefully negative phrase used by Jim Courier to describe Roddick's rallying style some years later.

Commentating on Roddick's fourth round loss to Stanislas Wawrinka at the 2011 Australian Open, Courier aired the unusual opinion that perhaps Roddick didn't realise just how not-hard he was in fact hitting the ball. Perhaps Roddick thought he was really beating the crap out of it. This seemed faintly ridiculous on the face of it. Surely he had noticed how his forehands into the open court would be tracked down by all but the most ponderous of opponents? Surely the experts he employed to tell him this kind of thing

were actually telling him this kind of thing? Courier had just been appointed to the Davis Cup captaincy. I never did find out whether he raised this matter with Roddick. One suspects he would not have found a receptive ear. Roddick always seemed very resistant to this kind of analysis.

Very occasionally in the final years Roddick would play the way he used to, and achieve a striking result, such as his defeat of Federer in Miami this year, or of David Ferrer at last year's US Open, or of Rafael Nadal in Miami in 2010. Yet afterwards he would essay some sarcastic comment to the effect that it was amazing how no one criticised his approach when he was winning. It was almost as though he didn't realise *how* he'd won, that he really believed he'd just been noodling about the same as ever. To everyone else difference was so blindingly obvious that it was hard to look at. But sometimes after the fact even ostensibly reckless flight stands revealed as a carefully planned escape. Even to the very end this contrast was apparent. At the recently concluded US Open the match he played to demolish Bernard Tomic was not the same one he played against Fabio Fognini a round later. He still beat Fognini handily, it's true, and it's churlish to suggest he went about it the wrong way. But imagine how exciting it would have been if he'd instead played the way he did the round before. Imagine if he'd gone out playing like that against Juan Martin del Potro. Imagine if he'd played like that for the last seven or eight years.

Todd Woodbridge wasn't wrong. The noise inside Rod Laver Arena was indeed very loud that night in 2005. It was sufficient that very few individual voices could be picked out through the cascading aural wash, relentlessly gushing down onto the two scampering young men. The umpire had a microphone, so we heard him. And Hewitt's frenzied bellows of 'C'mon' rang out clear, as did Roddick's anguished 'God *damn* it!' And from directly from my left came my wife's voice. She is blessed with a voice whose timbre can still traffic, a voice that laughs at the very idea of sound-proofing. Through the full-throttle patriotic chorus for Our Lleyton came her piercing cry of 'Go *Andy!*' The mob, offended to its core, redoubled its efforts. In the end they won, and Hewitt was on his knees with his improbably lumpish arms thrust aloft. A careworn Roddick trudged to the net. He had much to think on. Too much, it turned out.

The Days of Our Youth

I must confess I was late in learning to appreciate Juan Carlos Ferrero. I probably only really came to admire him in his career's long twilight, as a potent combination of injury, illness and a changing game lent the sun-washed years of his youth a sepia-tint. 'The days of our youth are the days of our glory' wrote Byron, somewhere between Florence

and Pisa. But it took a while for me to appreciate the heroism of Ferrero's quiet toil once his youth was cut short. Eight years is long time in the life cycle of any professional tennis player. But for Ferrero it was the distance from dethroning Gustavo Kuerten in the Rome final, to failing to qualify for the same event. It was an eternity, and the days of glory must have felt terribly remote indeed.

For his fans it was an eternity of heartbreak, but the man himself hardly ever complained. Initially, as he tore up the rankings, he had nothing much to complain about. I hardly saw him as Byronesque. I found it easier to cast him as the villain, and I don't mind admitting that the manner and regularity with which he dispatched my favourite players worried me. Nonetheless, the seeds of sympathy were sown early, the year before he rose to the No.1 ranking, even if they only flowered years later.

The first time I really noticed Ferrero was in a jazz club in Hanoi's French Quarter in the year 2000, which I mostly mention in order to establish my credentials as an intrepid global traveller, and to invest the scene with a little millennial flair. I hasten to add that Ferrero himself was not actually present in the jazz club. (I'm not sure he even likes jazz, and at the time I was having a hard time deciding whether I did.) However, there was a miniature version of him darting about inside the establishment's dismally small television. Given the era and the region, this was a cheap CRT model of local provenance and unfaithful colour-reproduction. The sky above Ferrero was greenish. Squinting through a thickening haze wrought by cigarettes, finely-honed trumpet solos and criminally cheap Long Island Iced Teas, I watched the tiny figure of the young Spaniard push an equally diminished Kuerten to five sets in the semifinals at Roland Garros, which had apparently been relocated to a toxic dump in Lilliput.

This was Ferrero's debut at the event, which has since returned to Paris. Indeed, he'd only contested his first full scale tour event the year before. A few months after that he'd contested his fifth, and won it. Now he was in the last four in Paris, giving the tournament's pre-ordained winner all he could handle. Rafael Nadal would of course win the French Open on debut five years later, one of the many ways in which he would eclipse his senior compatriot's achievements, but at the time the tennis world was rightly impressed. I would have been more impressed had I liked Kuerten less. As it was, I was anxious.

Even miniaturised, Ferrero posed a clear threat to my favourites, who in addition to Kuerten consisted of Pat Rafter and Pete Sampras. As far as I could tell, Ferrero had no real weakness. He was exceptionally nimble, boasted a tremendous forehand, a backhand that clearly wouldn't break down, and a perfectly serviceable serve, especially

the one up the T to the deuce court. Every shot was technically flawless, and it was hard to see what aspect of his game an enterprising opponent might hope to expose or molest. He was so smooth that even his errors looked deliberate, and he always appeared in control, even if the stats revealed he wasn't. He lost that day, but I had trouble seeing how anyone could reliably beat him. Months later in Paris, this time indoors, Marat Safin proved that Ferrero could be hit through given a sufficiently slick court, but Safin could do that to anyone anywhere, especially that year. 2000 was Ferrero's second full year on tour, and he ended it ranked No.12. Then he personally and comfortably defeated Australia to secure Spain's first ever Davis Cup title. These were the kind of things that twenty-year-olds accomplished back then, assuming they were as able as Ferrero.

Looking back, it was astonishing how quickly Ferrero insinuated himself among the elite. Suddenly, it was as though he was just there. (Seven years later I watched Novak Djokovic work a similar trick, and with a similarly impeccable technique, at least until Todd Martin so masterfully sabotaged his serve.) Kuerten and Safin ruled the rankings, while Sampras and Andre Agassi remained imposing. But if the former pair stumbled, or the later pair faded, Ferrero and Lleyton Hewitt were the next logical prospects, and the Australian's forehand was a liability. Ferrero, I predicted, would before long rule the sport. I wasn't pleased at this.

Ferrero's dominion didn't seem too far off when he actually beat Kuerten in the 2001 Rome final, again over five sets. Notwithstanding his inexplicable intervening loss to Albert Portas in Hamburg, it was clear to me that Ferrero would be the least surmountable obstacle to Kuerten's French Open defence. History shows that Michael Russel ultimately provided a sterner challenge than Ferrero did, but the Spaniard's straight sets loss in the semifinals did little to dampen expectations, even if, in hindsight, it did reveal a tendency for him to wilt when those expectations were highest. Still, two semifinals from two appearances: nothing in the sport was more certain than Ferrero one day winning a lot of French Opens. It was kismet.

Then Kuerten and Safin did stumble, thanks to their hip and brain respectively. Hewitt filled the breach, Sampras faded, though Agassi remained as good as ever. Ferrero percolated upwards, growing faster, smarter and more powerful. Whenever he won he looked unbeatable. Curiously, he looked equally infallible when he lost, which is to say that most of his losses felt like upsets, even though there were plenty of them. Everyone lost more back then. He reached the semifinals of the Masters Cup that year. The next year he reached the finals of the French Open. In the final Ferrero faced a seasoned clay-courter in Albert Costa, but he was still the overwhelming favourite. Kuerten had

succumbed to the surgeon's knife, Rafter had retired, and Sampras was all but spent. In my mind, only Costa stood between Ferrero and global domination.

Unbelievably, the moment suffocated the young Spaniard, abetted by a malingering foot injury. Costa romped through in four sets. Again I was watching on a tiny, old television, but this time it was a cold night in Melbourne, and the haze was due to exhaustion. Suddenly the certainty of Ferrero claiming the French Open and pounding world tennis beneath his dancing feet looked less certain. He looked forlorn and fallible, even as he lost, but especially afterwards as the silverware was doled out. Suddenly he seemed young, and small, and human, and suddenly I felt a pang of sympathy.

A year later, in 2003, he did win the French Open, and after reaching the final in the US Open a few months later ascended to No.1, as had been long foretold. He won the Madrid Masters, on indoor hardcourt, proving himself worthy of his top ranking. But by then I was no longer concerned. In fact, I don't recall that I minded at all. Perhaps it was because so many of my favourite players had disappeared into retirement or the wilderness, but I could now appreciate Juan Carlos Ferrero for the gracious and accomplished young man he was, one who ill-deserved the hard road ahead, the road that stretched from Rome to Rome, but left glory behind.

Appendix B: Great Matches

Great Matches You've Probably Never Heard Of #7

Hamburg, 2001, Final

(Q) Portas d. (8) Ferrero, 4/6 6/2 0/6 7/6 7/5

There is a reasonable case to be made that Albert Portas' victory at the 2001 Hamburg Masters constituted the decade's most unexpected result, while the ATP's later decision to deprive the tournament of Masters status was its biggest shame. Eleven short years ago, it was, unquestionably, a different era. For one thing, Germany had not one, but two Masters events: Hamburg on slow, low clay, and a slick indoor event in Stuttgart whose relocation I cannot recall lamenting when it moved to Madrid. For another, Masters titles were occasionally won by players ranked outside the top four. Very rarely they were won by Qualifiers. I realise this is hard to believe: there are now children speaking in complete sentences who were not alive the last time that happened. They stare at me with frank disbelief when I outline the magnitude of Portas' achievement, even as their parents hurriedly gather them up and explain why they must leave the park early.

In May 2001 Portas was 27 years old and had never won a tour-level title. A prestigious Masters event was a fairly outstanding way to start, and, as it turned out, finish. Hamburg was also his last title. His audacious title run was therefore categorically unlike, say, Goran Ivanisevic's as a wildcard a few weeks later at Wimbledon. Portas was a respectable tour player, and finished seven straight years in the top 100, but he'd never been enough of an also-ran to be considered a has-been. Upon claiming the Hamburg shield he lost in the first round in St. Poelten, and then fell in straight sets to the renowned claycourter Greg Rusedski first up at Roland Garros. He would follow this up by failing to win a match on grass. Indeed, he didn't win another match at Masters level until Monte Carlo 2003. This should give you some sense that Portas was far more practiced at losing handfuls of matches than winning them.

Nor were the six main draw matches Portas won in Hamburg in 2001 against minnows. By no means had the draw collapsed. He beat Magnus Norman in the second round, who was still ranked in the top ten, although the Swede was already afflicted by the hip injury that would curtail his career. Next he saw off Sebastien Grosjean, in what proved to be the Frenchman's breakout year (Grosjean would go on to reach the French Open semifinals weeks later and would end the season ranked No.7). In the quarterfinals

Portas dispatched a handy dirtballer in Alberto Martin, and then beat the ascendant Lleyton Hewitt – who was bound for No.1 – in the semifinals, despite failing to save a single break point. This sequence seemed all the more improbable once it became clear that Portas' arsenal lacked any notable ordnance besides the drop shot, which he deployed with a relentlessness that was almost comical, but somehow no less effective for that.

In the final he defeated Juan Carlos Ferrero, arguably the most daunting task in tennis at that particular moment. Ferrero had overrun the reigning world No.1 Gustavo Kuerten in a five set classic in the Rome final some weeks earlier (there used to be a week's gap between the two events), and Carlos Moya in a monumental four hour tussle in Barcelona a few weeks before that. (Very young readers loitering in public play areas are often startled to learn that best of five set finals were once the norm. Hamburg was indirectly instrumental in ruining that for everyone. This occurred in 2006, after Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer thoroughly wrecked each other in Rome, and showed no inclination to front up in Germany the following morning. In their absence Tommy Robredo claimed the event, forcing the ATP to take appropriate measures to ensure that would never happen again. It worked: Federer and Nadal contested the next two Hamburg finals, and Robredo didn't.) Ferrero was consequently on a 16 match winning streak. I suppose the case could be made that he was tired, and Portas afterwards conceded that fatigue had indeed been a factor in the fifth set. So did Ferrero, who added an abductor strain for good measure. The fifth set was hell.

The fourth set was the key, however. After splitting the first two sets, Portas lost nine straight games to fall down 0/3 in the fourth. It looked like it would be one of those straight sets wins with a hiccup. Portas later admitted that he'd been mainly determined to avoid exiting with a double bagel. For his part, Ferrero confessed afterwards that he'd grown complacent at this moment, and assumed the title was already his. But then Portas held, and then he broke back. The Rothenbaum crowd grew thunderous, and most of them seemed to be for the older Spaniard. A small portion of them were especially rambunctious for Portas, and Ferrero began to remonstrate testily with them, further fissuring his concentration. Portas eventually took the fourth in a tiebreak, regularly catching his opponent (and viewers) off guard by playing shots other than drop shots. Ferrero's foot-speed was already legendary, and he managed to run down a number of the actual drop shots, but, as the fifth set got underway he became increasingly timid in dealing with them, allowing Portas endless opportunities to pass, although he seemed disappointed to discover this required normal groundstrokes.

The standard – to be frank – plummeted in the fifth set. This final was not great because the quality of play was stratospheric, but because it amply compensated with drama. They muddled their way to 5/6, with Ferrero serving for the tiebreaker. Portas had already come within two points of the title, and looked terrified, with good reason. And yet, his nerve remained steady, as did his arm. He opened with yet another drop shot winner, arguably his finest of the afternoon. Even after three and a half hours, it was still good enough to elicit a shocked gasp from the commentators. Somehow Ferrero still wasn't picking them. It was scrambling, it was tense. It wasn't especially good, but it was scrambling and tense. And then Ferrero, the model of consistency through the entire clay season, faltered on the second championship point, and pushed a final weary backhand wide. Portas collapsed on his back. It was the best day of his life. In the press conference afterwards the moderator announced him as the 'Drop Shot Dragon', which stuck, as clumsy nicknames have a habit of doing.

I congratulated the Drop Shot Dragon in person for his achievement at the Australian Open the following year. He was seated amongst a group of Spanish players, watching (I think) Albert Costa on Show Court One, which was later renamed Margaret Court Arena Stadium Venue, presumably by a committee with a sense of humour. I told him that I'd very much enjoyed his Hamburg triumph. Perhaps it was the word 'triumph', or perhaps it was the crowd noise, or that fact that there were about four people separating us, but he couldn't quite make out what it was I was trying to say. He turned to his neighbour for help. It was Juan Carlos Ferrero. To his credit, Ferrero graciously conveyed my best wishes. It wasn't the best day of my life.

Those Points You Can't Get Back

Wimbledon, Semifinal, 2000

(12) Rafter d. (2) Agassi, 7/5 4/6 7/5 4/6 6/3

Andre Agassi and Patrick Rafter contested three consecutive Wimbledon semifinals between 1999 and 2001. Only the first of these, through which the American romped in particularly straight sets, wasn't a classic. It says a great deal that the two that Rafter won *were* classics, and what it mostly says is that the Agassi who resurfaced from his mid-career subsidence was rarely sunk easily. While not all of his losses from his later period were great matches – like Beethoven his career had a heroic late period, though whereas the composer succumbed to morose deafness, Agassi discovered that sincerity, broadcast at sufficient intensities, can provoke queasiness – plenty of them were.

Of the two semifinals that were classics, the second from 2001 was arguably the more dramatic, as Agassi's focus fractured upon being called for an audible obscenity, and Rafter recovered from a break down in the fifth set and eventually prevailed 8/6. But if the latter was the more dramatic, the second semifinal from 2000 had it covered for quality. It was one of the finest encounters of the decade. If compelled to compile a list of my favourite tennis matches – perhaps by a German terrorist claiming kinship to Hans Gruber and similarly given to labyrinthine schemes – then this one would be placed somewhere near the very top.

Initially, as ever between this pair, it appeared to be a mismatch. The 1999 semifinal remained fresh in most viewer's minds, and presumably in Rafter's as well. Then, Agassi had just claimed the French Open, and was embarking on a journey that would see him come within one match of holding all four majors at the same time. Most of this run lay in the future, which is to say that by the time Rafter fronted up for the 2000 semifinal his opponent's aura had expanded from imposing to invincible. Meanwhile Rafter's ranking had drifted from No.1 almost a year earlier into the twenties, owing mainly to acute tendinitis in his right shoulder. After another poor clay season, Rafter was openly questioning his own motivation, although by claiming the 's-Hertogenbosch title over a modest field he'd at least regained a modicum of confidence.

Agassi spoke to this before their semifinal: 'You know it's nice to see Pat play well. I think he's a great athlete with a lot to offer the sport of tennis. And this is a great arena in which to compete against him in.'

Meanwhile Rafter, characteristically wry, extolled the pleasures of playing Agassi: 'Well you have to be on top of your game, I think, and you just hope Andre has one of his bad days [. . .] I've played Andre a few times when he's had some really bad days. And, ah, I just hope he has one.'

As it happened, Agassi has an excellent day. The match begins with Rafter retrieving his errant ball toss, and offering a characteristic 'Sorry, mate,' which effectively gets the crowd on side. The first point, ominously, sees Agassi return low to the incoming Australian's feet, and the subsequent volley find the net. The second point sees Rafter elect to stay back, and belt a forehand into the corner. However, it feels immediately, as it will feel for the entire first set, that Agassi is the overwhelming favourite whenever he can neutralise Rafter's first serve, even with the latter at his athletic peak on the slick old grass.

In his biography, Agassi spoke of his match-up with Rafter, and of how from a purely technical standpoint he regarded it as a truer rivalry than the more advertised one with Pete Sampras. Rafter was a more traditional and reckless net-rusher than Sampras – he needed to be, given he lacked Sampras' serve and explosive power off the forehand – and his encounters with Agassi were endlessly fascinating for their near-complete contrast. Agassi was of course famed as the sport's greatest returner, and his virtuosity is on rich display in this match, and is only enhanced by recalling that this grass court is considerably faster than the turf that was laid down a couple of years later, and that neither of these players were using polyester strings. The decade had changed, but the epoch hadn't; Wimbledon remained the demesne of the career serve-volleyer. Sampras would go on to win this edition, and Goran Ivanisevic would finally claim it in 2001.

Like Sampras, Rafter had a habit of hanging with Agassi despite seeming outplayed, and then lifting suddenly beyond the Las Vegas's grasp. It was by no means something Rafter could turn-on at will, but there were always certain moments. Such a moment comes at the death of a first set in which Rafter is obliged to fight through nearly every service game. The Australian suddenly holds to love for 6/5, then puts together his most accomplished and audacious return game. He earns set points when Agassi double faults, clearly concerned about Rafter's willingness to chip-charge any second ball. An Agassi error later, and the first set, apparently from nowhere, is gone. In hindsight, the contours of the contest are easier to discern, how the American's exceptionally high first serve percentage paradoxically worked against him by instilling undue pressure on the rare second serves, which Rafter assaulted at every opportunity. And when a second serve came round at a crucial moment, the error duly followed. It was a classic grass court set, decided by a few points here and there.

Rafter's momentum is sustained into the second set, as he breaks again with a nearly undefendable chip-charge, and clean winners off the backhand, and the forehand return. Agassi immediately breaks back in a flurry of return winners, and a magnificent running backhand topspin lob. The tennis is superb, an unedited highlights reel. The pressure mounts on Agassi, who saves a pair of break points in the eighth game. In the ninth game Rafter blinks, and is broken for 5/4, and Agassi serves out the set, closing with a rare second serve ace. After an hour and twenty-three minutes, it is one set all.

The third set reprises the shape and the quality of the first, with Rafter somehow defying expectations that he will be wearily submerged in the cataract of passing shots gushing by. His first serve numbers hardly pick up – at one point he mutters 'first serve, mate!' before fending another ball from his toes then watching it flash by – but somehow his second delivery is doing just enough. The cataract never quite deepens into a terminal

inundation. On the other hand, he is beginning to match Agassi from the baseline, which will have important ramifications later on. As it so often does, the long seventh game proves crucial. Rafter holds, desperately, and then breaks to love for a 5/3 lead, but is broken back as he serves for the set. Once again Agassi crumbles at 5/6, and Rafter breaks for the set off a scything low pass.

But this is late period Agassi, who might sometimes crumble, but generally won't do so ruinously. He breaks to open the fourth set, nervously endures a five break-point counter-attack from Rafter, and then rides the advantage to the end, sealing it again with an ace. Rafter's first serve has proved recalcitrant all day, no matter how he's admonished it, but in the fifth his numbers rise sharply. The tennis is peerless. Rafter is rag-dolling himself about the court. Agassi's groundstrokes are an unending fusillade. Every part of the tennis court is seeing use. Here's how the American recounts it in *Open*:

'[H]e's acing me left and right. When he's not acing me he's dancing in behind his serve, letting nothing past. I try lobbing him. I hit what feel like unreturnable shots as they leave my racquet, but he always gets back in time. We play for three and a half hours, high-quality tennis, and it all comes down to the sixth game of the fifth set.'

In that sixth game, Agassi misses a rash drive volley, but nails a perfect topspin lob for 30-15. Then the sun pours out – prefiguring the 2007 final – and Rafter plays his most assured baseline point of the match, moving his opponent up, back and across the turf, and sealing it with a thunderous backhand winner that leaves Agassi stranded. A double fault, another muscular baseline exchange, and Rafter has the decisive break.

'I can't break him back. He's landing 74 per cent of his first serves, and he first-serves his way into the final . . . A year ago I beat Rafter here in the semis, when he felt the first twinges in his shoulder. Now he comes back and beats me in the semis with his shoulder fully healed. I like Rafter, and I like symmetry. I can't argue with that storyline.'

Rafter serves out this most coruscating of matches with consummate authority – besides another wayward toss and consequent apology – and he thrusts his arms heavenward as Agassi's final backhand return cannons in the net, which ripples momentarily, then drapes motionless. Rafter's satisfaction looks boundless.

Rafter would lose to Sampras in the final in four sets, the final in which Sampras broke Roy Emerson's record for most Major titles. And, after again seeing off Agassi in another classic, he would finish runner-up to Ivanisevic the following year, in the last great serve

volley final of the era. In 2002 a new age on new grass would commence inauspiciously with a low-grade volley-free final between Lleyton Hewitt and David Nalbandian. But for the moment, in 2000, it remained a playground for the great servers and volleyers, yet one in which a baseliner might still flourish, provided he was Andre Agassi.