

Federer, Djokovic, Murray - Who will Outgun Whom this Time

---MP Anil Kumar



This edition of Wimbledon is certain to serve up a treat. And like any feast, it will throw up few upsets too, says M P Anil Kumar

Wimbledon has once again laid out the ryegrass carpet for tennis buffs.

And the Championships started rolling at a time when men's tennis is on the crest of a wave.

My initiation into lawn tennis began on an afternoon in February 1979 in my alma mater Sainik School, Kazhakootam (Kerala).

A transistor pressed to his ear (to not disturb the siesta-types in our Prasad House dormitory), my senior B Nandakumar was raptly listening to running commentary but not cricket.

Curiosity had me gravitate to his bedside to gesture what was on. He swung his hand to indicate tennis and sotto voce conveyed India versus Australia. I conjoined my ear to the radio.

NanduB, as he was called, topped me up with the fundamentals of the game. Played at Madras, John Alexander, Ross Case and Geoff Masters combined to defeat (3-2) Vijay Amritraj, Sashi Menon and Anand Amritraj in that Davis Cup rubber. I was sold on tennis. Thenceforth, I devoured anything and everything about tennis, including Stan Smith.

Bjorn Borg nestled in my heart as the ultimate champion, and I often quarrelled

with the McEnroe fans among my mates. Though in a class of his own, that someone could be a fan of 'uncouth', 'rowdy' McEnroe was beyond my ken then.

The gloriously blessed Vijay Amritraj should have coexisted with Borg in my bosom, but like every Indian ace at Wimbledon, from Sardar Nihal Singh, Fyzee Brothers, Sydney Jacob, Ghaus Mohammad Khan, Dilip Bose, Ramanathan Krishnan, Naresh Kumar, Ramesh Krishnan to Leander Paes, he too stumbled short of the home straight.

The toast of last two decades -- Paes, Mahesh Bhupathi and Sania Mirza -- too lost fizz like Amritraj after their inaugural flourish, but they have rallied to prosper in the doubles circuit. Although fast-paced and watchable, with the top guns shrugging it off, the close-to-the-bone truth is that the doubles have been relegated to a scrap for the also-rans.

Anyway, I should not be grieving, for India is no sporting powerhouse. (Andres Gomez, an unassuming Ecuadorian, conquered Roland Garros in 1990.)

Borg's abdication in 1983 at the age of 26 produced a void, which was inhabited two years later by none other than the Lion of Leimen -- wunderkind Boris Becker. His triumphant Wimbledon campaigns in 1985 and 86 coincided with my playing tennis seriously at Air Force Station Pathankot where I found a sparring partner in Ravi.

An '86 evening, a stranger ushered himself as David, studying in London, on vacation

with his aunt Ruth (missis of Squadron Leader A R Nigam). Salutations and pleasantries over, he unsheathed a gleaming graphite racket, swished it about and heralded it as one chucked into the stands by Boris Becker during his 1985 giant-killing spree.

Wow! I snatched and examined it, gawped at the Puma logo on the strings. As the frisson of holding Boris's racket electrified me, my brain cautioned me not to be carried away; I glanced up at Ravi and scrunched up my brows to enquire whether David was pulling a fast one on us.

That night we rummaged through the sports magazines, only to confirm that the piece was indeed genuine Puma G Vilas racket that Boris wielded like an assault weapon in '85!

We clasped hands the next evening and I requested David for the Puma. No sooner, I was possessed by Becker, imitating his serve, volley and court acrobatics, boom-booming Ravi with thunderbolts. I thought so. I was later restrained by spasmodic pain in the left leg; my Beckeresque serving action was landing the racket-head on my left shank. I retreated, and wisely played like myself! What an evening with Boris!

In the 'eighties, the Borg-bond had me closely following the fortunes of his legatees -- Swedish trolls Mats Wilander, Joakim Nystrom, Anders Jarryd and Stefan Edberg. And the '80s buzzed with excitement as Wilander, Edberg, Becker, Ivan Lendl and McEnroe contested fiercely to be the

numero uno, sparked off top-flight tennis and raised the bar in the bargain.

The new gods Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic have enriched the grade of tennis, especially when the trio confronted each other. Well, the tennis aficionados have never had it so good since the '80s. This triumvirate has raced far ahead of the peloton. Unlike the Penta of the '80s, the Top Three are at home on all the three surfaces, without being peas from the same pod!

If you adore sublime shot-making and slick court-craft, you cannot but rally behind Federer. While he is the closest to a perfect tennis player, a Wizard, the best adjective and noun I can summon to describe Nadal is tireless Toiler. The remarkable rebirth authored by Djokovic through 3G -- enhancing fitness and stamina by sticking to Gluten-free diet, honing his Game by reinforcing forehand, return and second serve, and powering up groundstroke with the state-of-the-art Graphene racket -- has not only redefined Confidence but bespeaks his gumption too.

Sport peaks to its highs by riding on great rivalries, whether it's India vs Pakistan, Fischer vs Spassky, Muhammad Ali vs Joe Frazier, Argentina vs Brazil, Mike Powell vs Carl Lewis. What's so fascinating is the tenacious three-way rivalry: Federer vs Nadal (head-to-head: 10-20), Nadal vs Djokovic (20-15), and Federer vs Djokovic (16-13).

Nadal first held sway over Federer (Nadal battered at Federer's backhand -- one relative frailty in an otherwise flawless game -- with his top-spin-laden forehand), then we witnessed Djokovic getting the measure of Nadal (profiting through backhand down-the-line sizzlers), and doing unto Nadal what Nadal did to Federer. But Nadal reversed his seven straight losses by upending Djokovic at Monte Carlo last year, and tightened the screws on his nemesis at Roland Garros. Federer upset the apple-cart of a red-hot Djokovic at the very same Roland Garros in 2011 and at Wimbledon yesteryear. The three still have few scores to settle!



Those who fuss that the gulf between Fag-end Federer and the other two has broadened beyond catch-up are pettifogging; by conquering Wimbledon last year, and Halle the other day, Federer has notified that he is still an adversary to beat. No doubt, he needs something extra besides his mighty arsenal, exquisite gift and fire in his belly, to break the recent spell of the two he is under. Mind you, Federer is only pushing 32; Ken Rosewall, the Methuselah of tennis, prevailed at the Australian Open at a ripe

37! I believe Federer has an arrow still left in his quiver.

They have so far notched up 35 Grand Slam titles among themselves, and the awesome threesome could tot up six-dozen-plus Slam victories before they bow out one by one.

When one yawned that the sport was bereft of a serious challenger to overturn the pecking order, with his Olympics coup and US Open crown, unyielding defence and quicksilver riposte, Andy Murray staked the right to the Federer-Nadal-Djokovic

League. With Murray's cry for elevation to the pantheon, the head-to-head commands relevance:

Federer vs Murray (9-11); Nadal vs Murray (13-5); Djokovic vs Murray (11-7).

The Slam count will ultimately clinch the debate whether he belongs to the exalted League.

The upshot of this martial rivalry is the Fab Four have pushed each other unrelentingly, thus lifting the quality of the game itself. Besides, they have rewritten how tennis is played; notably, baseline slugfest has muscled out serve-and-volley. And the contemporary baseliners have raised physicality to another level (proof -- just rewind to the Australian Open '13 final

where the latest foes Djokovic and Murray locked horns).

In this quadripartite jostle for eternal glory, interestingly, each of the four rivals has won a Slam each since unheard-of Lukas Rosol undid Nadal last Wimbledon. Who will outgun whom this time? This edition of Wimbledon is certain to serve up a treat. And like any feast, it will throw up a few upsets too.