



AT LAST: CHANGES IN DAVIS CUP

I've just read the unsigned statement from the ITF regarding the brilliant redesign concept for Davis Cup and there is no doubt in my mind that it had to be written by Grand Slams chief executive Bill "My Feet Are Firmly Entrenched in Concrete" Babcock.

I can see Babcock right now -- seething, steam coming out of his ears -- as he tries to deal with the reality that someone has had the audacity to try to kick Davis Cup into the 21st Century.

If you somehow missed the news, a group of savvy marketing people, many from Australia, have proposed something I've been lobbying after for decades -- to junk the current, antiquated Davis Cup format that takes 11 months to complete and bring together a number of nations to one site after the ATP season for a sort of 10-day festival to decide who gets the cup.

I can't tell you how many times I've gone around and around with Babcock over this idea, and he's always simply dismissed it, as if no one except Bill Babcock could possibly have any clear vision of how to play Davis Cup.

But now, he's not dealing with some junk yard journalist. These guys have some clout -- enough that the ITF put out a carefully worded, somewhat contrite statement this morning. Here's a few of the more salient remarks:

"Over its history, Davis Cup has seen many changes in the structure of tennis -- some very significant, like the move to professionalism in 1968 and the founding of the pro tours in the 1970s. While Davis Cup has evolved and modernized, it has not lost its intrinsic values, based around home and away format that attracts great support from the fans, sponsors, television and the players themselves. . .

"This proposal has some interesting elements. It also has many challenges that must be faced if it is to succeed."

Davis Cup "modernized?" Hilarious. The first of four rounds of Davis Cup play is coming up in a few weeks and even those players who have played religiously over the years, like Andy Roddick, won't show. Roger Federer? He seldom plays and he won't be there for Switzerland's first round.

And who can blame these guys. Roddick is on the cusp of having a very big year, but had a recent leg injury. He doesn't want to change surfaces from hardcourt to clay this early in the season. Federer is scaling back his play not only in Davis Cup, but exhibitions.

There's a lot of good about Davis Cup. The team format gets people to rally around the flag and it has the potential to pit the best against the best. But the absurdity of this event is that it takes 11 months to complete. They play the first round in February, the second in June, the third in September and the final in December. Ask the average fan before a second round match in June who his country beat in the first round and chances are he couldn't remember.

Imagine playing the first round of the NCAA basketball tournament, then waiting three months to play the second. And when the winner is declared in early December, you get about eight weeks to savor the championship before you have to play again.

These guys from Australia are on the right track. We don't need Davis Cup every year any more than we need World Cup soccer or any other sport every year. It's not even practical.

Initial plans are for an independently run tournament, initially planned to be staged over 10 days every other year, and the concept has been shown to the game's leading executives and marquee players."

Here's a statement from Gemba, the marketing organization behind this change: "Today's consumers want their entertainment in a different form. Of course, the pride of tennis are the Grand Slam tournaments and we would never do anything to change that. But we are conscious of the need for tennis to bring in an entire new breed of followers who don't have the attention span to watch five sets.

Stay tuned and keep your fingers crossed. This is the best thing to have happened to Davis Cup since the start of the Open era. I think Gemba has some refining to do. I think they'll find that 32 nations is too unwieldy, for example. But they're on the right track and it sounds as if they've got enough backing to crack some of that concrete that Babcock has been standing in for years.

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