



HENIN STRUGGLES THROUGH TO SEMIS

The quick-twitch Justine Henin feet were as twitchy as advertised, but the brain is tired and before she hits the court on Wednesday for her semifinal, she needs at least a couple of deep massages -- on the brain as well as the rest of the body.

This 7-6 (3), 7-5 win over Nadia Petrova was far too much of a struggle. Her first serve was awful. Her gimme forehands, the ones with plenty of set-up time and inside the baseline, were slapping net. Even the famed one-handed backhand, while mostly effective, went dancing wide more times than I can remember.

It happens. The feet feel great. You're moving beautifully. But after four matches, three of them exceptionally tough (Elena Dementieva, Alisa "Thunderthud" Kleybanova and Yanina Wickmayer, the brain slows down.

That usual chemistry and intimacy that exists between the mind and the feet and arm, which result in beautiful tennis, just wasn't there Monday afternoon in Melbourne, and it left Henin having to think her way through to victory over Petrova, who may have had her best Grand Slam since 2005.

Henin found a way to win, even though down 0-3 in the second set, though she certainly did not find the right path with her serving, putting in only 45 percent of her firsts (39 percent in the first set) and having more unforced errors (26) than winners (20), which is not normal for her.

She won because she was by far the steadier of the two players, even without her best stuff, and she finally got on Petrova's weaker forehand and stayed on it, forcing a boatload of errors.

Petrova had a very tough time getting balls past Henin, despite her superior hitting power, because Henin was moving great. But once she got to the ball, the rhythm. . .the timing. . .whatever happens when the mind is in perfect sync with the stroke . . . it just wasn't there for much of this match.

My guess is mental fatigue from a lot of very difficult and pressure-filled matches. And, though she draws a non-seed in the semis (the winner of the Jie Zheng-Maria Kirilenko match to be played later today), it will still have its pressure. It is, after all, a semi -- a chance to reach another Grand Slam final.

So she'll chill the rest of today and all day Tuesday and I think she'll be there on Wednesday, ready to play a higher brand of tennis.

This was a good performance for Henin because she won. However, it was not elegant. And her new scorched-earth policy of putting pressure on her opponents' serve worked only on second serves Monday.

She went for a lot of big returns off Petrova first serves and sprayed a lot of balls long, wide and into the net. She was, however, extraordinary on second serve.

Still, she lacked the overall aggressiveness she had shown in her previous four matches, in which she averaged 25 trips to the net. Only 15 shots inside the service line in this match, and she converted 10.

One of those five misses came on a high ball Petrova threw up with Henin leading 40-15 at 3-3 in the second set. She should have let the ball bounce, about five feet from the net, and put away an easy overhead. Instead, she tried an inside-out forehand swinging volley, which she drove wide.

On almost any other day she makes that play. But on Monday the messages being sent down from Justine's head were arriving at her right arm late.

An off day against a tough player, but a win. That sort of thing happens a lot for champions.

Charles Bricker can be reached at bricker@primesportsnetwork.com

