



HOW MURRAY ROSE TO THE TOP

I wrote two days ago that Andy Murray was playing the best tennis at the Australian Open through the first four rounds and, even with Rafael Nadal's hugely disappointing knee injury/retirement on Monday, Murray has only reinforced my view.

He had swept through the first four rounds playing in his usual way -- picking up a free point here and there off his first serve, forcing errors for most of his points and being extremely selective about when to play for more risky winners.

I've many times written that once he reaches the upper reaches of the draw, against the best players, he cannot afford to play passively. He has to find a balance between pressing down on the accelerator and going back to his basic counter-punching, defensive, forced-errors game, and he certainly looked as if he found it against Nadal.

Let's look at some numbers.

In his fourth round match against John Isner, he had 11 winners, four unforced errors in the opening set and 32 and 8 for the four-set match. Typical Murray.

But in his quarterfinal with Nadal, he was 15 and 11 on winners to unforced errors in the opening set and 38 and 25 for the match. And remember, the win over Nadal was essentially a two and a half set match.

A year ago, when he lost to Fernando Verdasco at the Australian Open, he had 24 winners, 21 unforced errors after three sets. You can see, quantitatively, how he's becoming more aggressive against the top players. And you could see, first hand, how much more aggressively he was hitting to the corners. He has to continue doing that to defeat Marin Cilic in the semis.

As for Nadal, this is tragic. We'll know more later today I think, but initially it felt to him like the same injury to his knee from last year. This time, he quit before aggravating it further.

He wasn't the only injured player out there Tuesday. Andy Roddick appears to have a pinched nerve that left a couple fingers numb early. It didn't affect his velocity, but he gradually began having more serious shoulder problems, and so he's out of there before most thought would be his time.

Here we are a few weeks into the season and the injuries to top players are piling up. Do you think this has anything to do with the ridiculously short off-season the ATP allows its players? Of course it does.

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