



## **IS IT OVA FOR VAIDISOVA?**

As Nicole Vaidisova offered up a limp handshake to her No. 230-ranked conqueror, all I could do was sit there, courtside, wincing and wondering why I had just wasted an hour of my life watching this 6-4, 6-2 beating.

What was I doing here. Better question. What was Vaidisova doing here at this \$25,000 USTA deep bush league event? If you're a fallen star, you play these events because you're trying to rescue your career. Yet Nicole gave no indication that she wants to be rescued or that she's even capable of rescuing herself.

Unless she could reach a ball with three steps or fewer, she gave almost no effort. There was no passion. There were none of those telltale racket bounces off the court. Nothing.

I understand this was a big, big comedown from her days of reaching the semifinals of the French Open or the quarters at Wimbledon. But it's a tournament and if you've got any integrity, any heart and any soul for the game, you go out there and play hard.

At one point in the opening set, 17-year-old Christina McHale of Englewood Heights, N.J., dashed in for a drop shot that may or may not have bounced twice. The chair umpire made no call, so, for the record, it was good.

But after she bunted the ball back at Vaidisova, Nicole just looked at it. Never played it. Then, she looked over to the corner, where a couple of IMG coaches were sitting, and held up one finger, then two -- as if to ask, "What do you think, one bounce or two."

What did she think they were going to do? Overrule the chair?

I turned up at this small event because, like many others that showed, I was hopeful that, finally, someone had lit a fire under Vaidisova, now ranked No. 188, and she had figured out that she was letting a lot of tennis talent go to waste. I thought she was here to start clawing her way back, the way Andre Agassi did when he sunk to No. 141.

What a waste. She was going to be so good. She wasn't going to be the fastest elephant in the herd, but she had a beautiful, and effective, service motion and she could zing off both sides. Barely 16 years old, she upset No. 1 Amelie Mauresmo, then Venus Williams to reach the semifinals of the French Open, where she lost in three to Sveta Kuznetsova.

Seven months later she was in the semis at the Aussie Open. Then, the quarters at Roland Garros and two quarters at Wimbledon. Then, the world collapsed for her. She fell in love with fellow Czech pro Radek Stepanek, which seemed to sidetrack her. Then, she fell out with her stepfather, Alex Kodat, who had coached her to the top.

Still, she was only 17 or 18 and there was so much ahead of her. That's why I thought, dumbly, that it would be a delight to drive out to Lutz and watch what I hoped was the "new" Nicole.

There are no ball kids at these \$25,000 events and, at one point in the second set, Vaidisova's first serve slapped the net and rolled back to a point about six inches behind the baseline, between the single and doubles sidelines.

As much danger as that ball presented during a rally, she never went over to poke it back to the fence or pick it up before hitting her second serve. She just didn't care deeply.

I roused myself from chair as she collected her bag. I wanted to ask what her tennis plans were. She ducked around the swimming pool next to the court and off to a car before you could shout, "Play two." Her coaches picked up her tournament check, which was \$250, and they were gone in a flash.

Two hundred and fifty bucks! Well, you know, this isn't the French Open. And that sure isn't the Nicole Vaidisova I used to know.

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