



MURRAY: IN A HURRY

I'm not saying (yet) that Andy Murray is going to be hoisting his first Grand Slam cup when this thing is over next Sunday, but after this virtuoso display against John Isner this afternoon in Melbourne there is no doubt in my mind that right now, at this halfway point, he's playing the best tennis at the Aussie Open.

Isner is a tough matchup for anyone because of his prodigious serving and, in fact, there wasn't a break in this 7-6 (4), 6-3, 6-2 round-of-16 win until near the end of the second set. When Isner is serving as brutally as he has in this tournament, he presents a nervous challenge for even the best, and no doubt as he and Murray moved steadily toward the opening-set tiebreak, the thought was in Andy's head that if Isner wins every breaker serve and I screw up just once, I'm down a set.

Murray, however, was nerveless, easily taking advantage of all the other edges he has over Isner and patiently waiting for his moment to crack Big John's 130-135 mph serves.

This was very typical Murray tennis. (a) He looks extremely fit from his off-season training in South Florida. (b) He played classic AndyBall, which means he forces the errors rather than rolls up winners. At the end of the second set, Murray had 22 winners and six unforced errors. He was 32 and 8 for the match. (c) He knew, as everyone else does, how to deal with Isner and he executed that game plan beautifully. He moved inside the baseline to take Isner's fairly big second serve, taking the ball early enough that Isner's outrageously high kickers had no chance of handcuffing Murray's returns. In the long rallies, Murray got on Isner's backhand and tortured Big John into error after error. Finally, he threw in nearly a dozen drop shots (I stopped counting), and I can't recall Isner winning any of them.

With probably Rafa Nadal up next, (Nadal was scheduled to play Ivo Karlovic later in the day), can Murray continue this run?

When I said I'm not necessarily saying he can win the Open, it's because I don't know whether Murray is going to be able to change his game to deal with Nadal. He can get away with his forced-error policy through the early rounds, but it won't be good enough against players like Nadal, or Federer, or Davydenko -- players who can grind with him. He has to take more risks, be more aggressive.

For the 6-foot-9 Isner, this loss will prey on his mind for some days, maybe weeks, because he performed exactly as he needed to perform to put himself in position to win the first set, including earning a break point that was a set point in the first. He missed that opportunity with an inside out forehand, and not by much.

He doesn't have a great backhand and his volleying against the better players, who are going to make him bend for low passing shots, needs a lot of work. His foot speed and guile inside the baseline against drop shots was pathetic Saturday. But he does have that fabulous serve, and for almost the entire first set it kept him in contention.

Until he double-faulted long at 3-4 in the breaker. That and a really bad mental lapse on the final point of the set.

Isner was lined up well inside the court for an inside-out forehand when something went burp in his brain. He had already taken advantage of his inside-out for a number of points and now, for reasons perhaps not even he knows, instead of driving that shot, he hit an inside-out drop shot.

One word. Duh.

There may come a day when Isner's finesse game is premier quality, but at this point in his young career, he has hands of steel. No touch at all. His dropper slapped into the net and Murray trotted off with the first set tiebreak.

Nevertheless, on balance, this tournament was a huge success for Isner and his coach, Craig Boynton, who trains the big guy at Saddlebrook Resort just outside Tampa, Fl. Ranked a career best No. 28 when he came to Melbourne, Isner could be low 20s when the new rankings come out and he'll be an obvious choice of captain Patrick McEnroe for the Davis Cup team with Andy Roddick and James Blake not playing.

For Murray, he'll take a very high level of confidence into the quarters and a match against Nadal would be blockbuster. He hasn't lost a set and been taken to a tiebreak only by Isner. He's playing great finesse tennis. He's playing smart tennis. He's playing AndyBall.

And if he can maintain all that play with more risk at the right times he can have that first Slam he's been chasing now for three years.

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