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The last Roland Garros is already in history: here's how Sanchez and the American Chinese puzzled world tennis.



PARIS. (...) Little Michael Chang's problem is certainly more complex. (...) Chang saved, during the fourth set, something like ten break-points, four in the third game, five in the seventh, the last in the ninth.

24 hours after the end of the match, I still struggle to convince, as I run over my note-book again, filled with exclamation marks.

I think it's fair to remind that a dubious point was awarded to Little Michael at the end of a long ground inspection, on another one he was helped by the net, two were winners, and six were Edberg's mistakes. With this I don't want to state that the little predestined was only lucky.

To win five set matches in Roland Garros' stadium, luck is not enough for sure. It seems to me that it was Edberg, instead, to waste a big chance, but not so much for his fault, as for a one or two minute difference.

The final, in fact, can be divided into three segments. The start saw a strangely awkward Edberg, unable to find the ball, while the little was phenomenal in multiplying, almost as an illusionist acrobat of Beijing's Circus.

On one hand, such a continuous forcing brought Little Michael a set up, on the other it tired him, leaving control of the game in Edberg's hands, from the second half of the second set on.

Here the match we all critics were expecting from the start began, a match in which Stefan's serve, his runs to the net, his heavy balls, his longer stretch, would come out on top. So those two quite obvious sets would end 6-3, 6-4 for Edberg, but, hidden by the banality of the score, the junior's obstinate defense, that stoic returning the ball once more than possible of his, those breathtaking runs of his that would cut off also a Wilander at his best, remained there. That defense seemed to have the features of desperation.

We all thought that, bouncing from a corner to the other, Little Chang would end asphyxiated, maybe with cramps again, as against Lendl. The series of break-points saved, in the fourth, would be interrupted sooner or later, we old watchers said to one another. Instead, Little Michael would manage to get off that mined ground, thanks a little to his own skills, a little to God's help, and, in the end, to Edberg's weariness.

It looks curious that a guy like Stefan, who had looked very fresh in the fifth set against Becker, started to go down between the second and the third hour of play. It's fair to notice that, Sunday, temperature had suddenly gone 10 degrees upper, and that a Californian stays better in the heat than a Scandinavian. In '82 seventeen-year-old Mats Wilander wouldn't have probably beaten Vilas without a sudden dog day. But here, with Edberg, heat is just one of the causes.

Edberg's weariness is also due to the extraordinary position Little Michael had the courage to assume right from the start. Stefan's serve is one of the best in the world, and the ball thrown to the left, and hit with a great work from the back muscles, bounces very high, with a forward righthand compound effect.

Returners usually stay three meters behind the baseline and Stefan has all the time to approach the net, and the comfort to volley ascending balls. Little Michael didn't. With his Prince held with both hands, almost as a Crusade's sword, Chang advanced in praying attitude, 'till a couple of meters inside the bottom line.

At first, this finding of his had looked tactical, similar to the temporary one that led Lendl to fury. Instead it wasn't. Chang would stay for all the match in that incredible advanced position managing, with huge reflexes, to subdue Edberg's balls of service in their rising phase, before they became unreachable for his modest stature and his two-handed backhand.

Frozen for an entire set, Stefan found little by little a way to the net, taking advantage of some unnoticed foot faults. At the volley, though, he was forced to sudden brakings, to distensions and extensions that were as hard as Tomba's, while he goes down through the stakes.

