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by **Nick Stout**



Stefan Edberg shake hands with the chair umpire after losing the 1991 Wimbledon semifinal to Michael Stich

Michael Stich officially measures 6 feet, 4 inches - 1.93 meters - and he never stood as tall as he did Friday, when he pushed the defending champion not only out of Wimbledon but out of the No. 1 slot in the official ATP computer rankings.

Stich, 22 a German who had risen to No. 6 from No. 42 in the rankings in six months, managed to humble Stefan Edberg even though he could never break his serve. He did it by gobbling up three tiebreakers, and the final score was 4-6, 7-6 (7-5), 7-6 (7-5), 7-6 (7-2).

"I just tried to keep on going in the match," said Stich, whose path to the final included a quarterfinal triumph over Jim Courier. "At the end it paid off."

Stich now has a chance to emerge from the shadow of Boris Becker when he challenges his famous compatriot for the championship on Sunday.

Becker beat David Wheaton, 6-4, 7-6 (7-4), 7-5, to set up the first all-German final in Wimbledon history.

When the new rankings are released Monday, Becker will reclaim the No. 1 spot he held briefly earlier this year. By then, the three-time champion will have won or lost his sixth Wimbledon final in seven years. He won the title in 1985, '86 and '89 and was runner-up to Edberg in 1988 and 1990.

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Stich and Edberg played less brilliantly Friday than might have been expected from two semifinalists on their favorite surface. The excitement rested mainly in the closeness of the

score.

The veteran champion Fred Perry, commenting on BBC radio, lamented the lack of charisma in such an important match. The spectators, he said, had "nobody to hate, nobody to love."

If each player was most effective with his volley - notably Edberg on the backhand and Stich on the forehand - each was equally impotent as a receiver of serves. Even the softer deliveries that followed the first-serve faults were more often than not driven meekly into the net or mis-hit wildly into space.

"I think I have been playing some very, very good tennis," said Edberg, who until Friday had not lost a set. "The problem today was that I lost the timing on my returns. I didn't hit enough returns to really make him play. I played three or four bad points, and that cost me the match."

Serving well through most of the match, Edberg gave away the second set with two double faults in the tiebreaker. The second one was crushing because Edberg had just scored off Stich's serve.

In the third-set tiebreaker, Edberg fanned on what should have been an easy overhead put-away.

"Obviously I didn't watch the ball," he said. "It's as simple as that."

And in the final tiebreaker, the champion was beaten twice on his serve: once when the ball eluded him after skimming the net, then when Stich responded to his hard backhand volley with a fierce forehand passing shot.

Stich, who served eight aces, finally clinched the match, three hours and eight minutes after it started on a nearly cloudless afternoon, with a service winner.

The players walked off the court together, Stich with his fist raised, Edberg looking glumly downward.

"Stefan, he played nearly perfect serve and volley tennis," Stich said. "He didn't miss many volleys in the first three sets. Then I got the feeling that he got a little bit tired. He didn't serve that hard any more, but still very solid. It was a really tough match."

If it were not for the tiebreaker, a relatively modern convention in tennis, Edberg and Stich might still be engaged in the second set because neither was yielding anything on his serve.

Stich's only chance to break in the match came with Edberg down, 0-40, at 5-5 in the third set. But Edberg got out of that predicament with some fine volleying and a service winner.

Edberg broke Stich in the first set to go to 3-2, and it was enough to carry him through. He had another chance at 2-2 in the fourth, but Stich fought off four break points to save the game.

It was the last time either player's service game was in jeopardy.

Wheaton, who had tamed Ivan Lendl and Andre Agassi en route to the semifinals, his best Grand Slam result, expressed his disgust at lost opportunities against Becker.

"I felt I outplayed him today," Wheaton said, shaking his head over his 10 unconverted break points. "It's amazing I lost in straight sets with the amount of chances I had."

Wheaton said that even at match point, which Becker won with a hard return of a second serve, he felt that he was close enough in the match to have a chance if he could win the third set.

"I wasn't intimidated by being in a semifinal at Wimbledon," said the 22-year-old grass-court player from Minnesota. "My mind was just churning on how to beat Boris. And I ran out of time."

Stich's climb up the ranking ladder has been quiet but steady. He has not won a tournament this year, but he has had a consistently strong spring: some quarterfinals here, some semifinals there, and three finals in which he lost.

Respected by his peers for a stinging serve and a fierce forehand volley, Stich came out of his match with Edberg having served 85 aces in six matches. He also handed Edberg the second-fastest serve of the tournament, one of his deliveries Friday being clocked at 125 miles an hour (201 kph).

Stich was upbeat about playing Becker on Sunday.

"I beat the No. 1 player, the defending champion in the semifinals," he reminded anyone who may have forgotten. "I think it doesn't matter who I'm playing. I'll have a very good chance in the final."

In their only previous encounter, at the indoor tournament in Paris in October, Becker beat Stich handily, 6-2, 6-1.

Edberg probably knew the end was at hand when the net-cord point put Stich ahead, 2-1, on his serve, in the final tiebreaker. Edberg was in the forecourt and had the shot covered, but he could only look on helplessly as the ball struck the net and bounded past him on the left.

It was not the first such stroke of luck for Stich in this tournament. He probably survived the fourth round because a net-cord ball fell in his favor while Alexander Volkov was serving for the match.

The recipients of such lucky points traditionally offer a little hand-wave to their opponents, as if to say: "I sorry I had to win the point like that." And Stich had another occasion for making the gesture on Friday: He had fired one of his volleys like a bullet straight into Edberg's chest.

"I hit him on purpose," Stich said, sounding meaner than he probably meant to. "I wanted to hit

him. But still you say, 'I'm sorry.' "