

From the chapter

## NICE GUYS ALWAYS WIN

At a pinch, Mats Wilander could live with losing against Swedish players. What he couldn't stand was being beaten by those who were younger than him. In March 1984 he got beaten.

In the final of Milan's major indoor tournament he was to play Stefan Edberg, who was approaching the senior elite at record pace. They hardly knew each other; it was only a few months since Edberg had played at junior level.

"I always thought the pressure was on the older player, regardless of the situation. With Stefan it was really hard; I was irritated because I was older and should be winning, and he was playing so damn well."

Edberg ploughed through Wilander with serves that bounced high, which Wilander never got a touch on. It ended 6-4, 6-2.

A month later, Mats found himself playing a final against another new Swede. Henrik Sundström won in Monte Carlo - he was the same age, but had come to the ATP tour via matches in minor leagues in the US and tours in Asia, and was now charging up the rankings.

Wilander was saving his best form for the autumn's Davis Cup matches. He gave Sweden the lead against Czechoslovakia in an easy win against Tomáš Šmíd, and then world-class player Lendl secured a tight grip on Henrik Sundström by winning the first two sets. So the Swede changed tactics – and managed to turn the match around. Sundström's play focused on getting on the ball hard, with extreme topspin.

"Sundström also had the most beautiful one-handed backhand I've ever seen," Wilander says. "He played a big game, was better than I was, in any case on clay and from back court."

# Grand-Slammers – the lives of Björn Borg, Stefan Edberg & Mats Wilander

Mats Holm & Ulf Roosvald

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The year ended with Wilander taking his third Grand Slam title by beating Kevin Curren in Melbourne. For that reason, he was Sweden's obvious choice as anchor in the 1984 Davis Cup final, which was to be played against USA at the Scandinavium arena in Gothenburg over the last days of the year.

But that year had also been one in which the other Swedes had almost caught up with him. The Swedish players who started training at Scandinavium ahead of the final were ranked fourth (Wilander), sixth (Järryd), and seventh (Sundström) in the world. Jocke Nyström ranked eighth, but realised he wouldn't get a place on the team and went off on holiday with his wife Susanne and their little daughter. For the doubles, Järryd was paired with Stefan Edberg, 18.

Sweden was no longer a one-man team, as it had been in Borg's time. The problem was that the USA Davis Cup captain Arthur Ashe brought along the two best singles players, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors, and the world's sharpest doubles pair, McEnroe and Peter Fleming, who'd won all of the 14 Davis Cup matches they'd played.

While groundsman in brown uniforms assembled the gigantic Davis Cup trophy stand, the court was being set up. Truckload after truckload of rust-red tennis clay was tipped into the ice hockey rink. "Laying clay indoors is a cop-out", McEnroe complained. He had his best-ever season behind him, and had only lost two matches over the whole year. One of those losses had happened on clay. The world number two Jimmy Connors saw his chance to add a Davis Cup trophy to the others in his trophy cabinet and abandoned his longstanding boycott of the national team.

The Swedish team was focused and close-knit. Sundström and Edberg were new to the gang, but blended in well. The reserves, brothers Hans and Stefan Simonsson, acted as sparring partners. Hans' task during the training sessions was to slice his backhand and play at the net like McEnroe, Stefan's was to hit flat, Connors-ish groundstrokes. The training session was conducted in a focused manner. The team gathered, clenched their fists, and promised one another they'd give their utmost. It wasn't hard for them to see that their opponents' team spirit paled in comparison.

“One time when we were about to train straight after the Americans, I took the chair Connors had been sitting in a minute earlier,” says Mats Wilander, “when I looked down at the ground between my feet I could see how Connors had written ‘Fuck you, Arthur’ in the clay. It was pretty absurd.”

The two singles players and the captain were such wildly different people. Working-class boy Connors had never been able to stand Ashe’s intellectual attitude, and the bitter atmosphere of the 1975 Wimbledon final was far from dissipated. McEnroe and Connors barely spoke to one another. They never had done. McEnroe and Ashe mostly felt a mutual respect which meant that they avoided conflict – on the other hand, Ashe, in his capacity as manager, was a red rag to the authority-hating world number one.

Mats Wilander prepared in peace and quiet for his first singles match, against Connors. In the dressing room he sat and pinned the agreed advertising logos to his shirt. Anders Järryd sat beside him:

“When he was done, he picked up shirt number two, the one he had as a spare, and was about to put the badges on that one too. But then he stopped in the middle of what he was doing. ‘Nah, I don’t need another shirt. This won’t take more than three sets.’ Then he went out and beat the world number two 6-1, 6-3, 6-3. He had such exceptional self-confidence.”

Connors spread both shots and bad vibes around him during the match. He swore, yelled rude words, called the umpire gay, and finished up by going and shaking the umpire’s chair.

“I felt like I’d never take a beating from Connors. Not on clay, it wasn’t going to happen,” Mats says. “Also, he’d just changed rackets, which was really odd, seeing as he’d just won the US Open. So I was totally confident that day.”

Mats Wilander is full of contradictions. On the one hand, he had – and still has – a fundamental belief in himself and his style of playing tennis. It was that side of him that always impressed his opponents and fellow players: his way of never backing down from a challenge, his way of trusting himself in critical situations. On the other hand, he was easily impressed by others’ talents and technique, and he could then see – and address – the flaws in his own.

That's why he can also completely happily say that "Henrik Sundström was much better than me on clay," or, "Anders Järryd was much better than me indoors".

Mats was quite simply smart enough to realise that there was always more to learn. If he became overawed by the world around him he could just ring his parents, which Mats did after almost every match in his career.

The conversations almost always followed the same pattern:

"My mum would answer, and I'd say: 'Hey Mum, it's Mats, can I speak to Dad?' 'How the hell'd you beat him? It was bloody great, Mats!' my dad would say. And I'd say: 'but he's 25<sup>th</sup> in the world, and I'm third...' 'Yeah, but I saw him play the other day and what a blooming great volley he had!' my dad said. 'Yeah, but we were playing on clay, you know,' I'd say, 'Well, it's just fantastic...' And so it would go on... and it meant a lot to me that I had a father who always and without exception was so impressed by my accomplishments."

In the second rubber of the Davis Cup final it was Henrik Sundström's turn out on the indoor clay. He drove McEnroe mad by never missing. Everything came back to McEnroe, who in the end could do nothing but swear over the umpiring and the stupid court these Swedes had laid. Sundström won 13-11, 6-4, 6-3.

In front of 13,000 vocal home fans Järryd and Edberg managed to keep their nerves in check for day two. They won by three sets to one, against an angry, sulky McEnroe and a noticeably shaky Fleming. The doubles specialist, who was almost two metres tall, and already had four Davis Cup titles to his name, bowed out of the tournament with a double fault and his first loss.

It was a magnificent Swedish triumph, their second in the Davis Cup. It was also a win for Sweden's collective approach against an unruly, divided American star team. The Swedes celebrated their victory; the Americans drowned their sorrows. The third day was to begin with the Wilander-McEnroe rubber. It could have been a great match between two of the world's best players, a potential reprise of the epic struggle in St. Louis and a springboard into the next tennis season. Now it became something else. During the presentation at the net before the game, McEnroe hissed at Mats from the corner of his mouth: "Hey, kid, I hope you're as hungover as I am." "No worries, I am", Mats whispered back.

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Given the circumstances, it turned out to be a well-played game, which McEnroe won, but it was mainly interesting for the statisticians. One of the biggest sporting triumphs had already gone to one of the most popular teams.

The mood in the two teams was obvious too. It had gone right through the TV screens into the living rooms of Swedes, Americans and tennis fans all over the world. The Swedes looked sportsmanlike and wholesome, the Americans... the opposite. In the USA, there was a big stir, and the tennis association felt obliged to take action. In the tough competition with other sports over TV viewers, tennis couldn't afford to waste valuable exposure by letting the players act like spoilt brats. Even if the appearance was far from McEnroe's worst performance on a tennis court, he was in principle banned from the Davis Cup – or rather, his captain was forbidden from selecting him. It wasn't until 1987 that McEnroe played for the American side again.

Mats Wilander:

“It was a fantastic victory for us. But at the same time, it became less valuable the more we heard about what had happened in their team. McEnroe and Connors refused to play against one another in training, and Fleming only played doubles. So their fourth man, Jimmy Arias, was forced to train with both of them. He spent eight hours a day at Scandinavium and had to lie around in the dressing room waiting for Connors or McEnroe to turn up.”

But that was the Americans' problem. In the heavens of Swedish tennis, there were no clouds, only new stars sparking to life.

Translated from the Swedish by Nichola Smalley