

From the chapter

ARTIST IN A HAIRSHIRT

“Your body language is so bad. It infects your game. You won’t win any matches if you look like you do now out on the court.”

TONY PICKARD

In the first quarter-final, Sampras slaughtered Volkov, but everyone’s eyes were on the evening match between Courier and Agassi. The atmosphere was tense, like before a heavyweight boxing match, as the players, both wearing caps, walked out onto court. Most bets were on Agassi, but Courier was better at concentrating: he clenched his fist at his opponent after winning important points and took home the match in four sets. The new world number one looked increasingly like he was going to go all the way.

For Stefan’s part, Ivan Lendl was waiting in the quarter-final. A few weeks earlier, Stefan had been staying and training with Ivan at his enormous residence in Connecticut. At Flushing Meadows they continued to train together. In contrast to Wilander, Connors, McEnroe and many other players on the tour, Stefan had nothing against spending time with Lendl, who’d just become an American citizen.

“I’m someone who has a hard time really disliking anyone,” Stefan says. “You have to allow for differences in others, so I had no problem with Ivan. I trained with him a bit, because he was so professional. You have to take Ivan as he is. He has many good sides and some that are less good. He has strong opinions on what’s right and wrong, he can be very black or white.”

They both liked order, depended on order. Stefan has to have routines in order to function; he washes up coffee cups as soon as they’re empty. At Lendl’s, the rackets hung in a line in a separate room, where his tennis shoes were also laid out in neat rows.

Edberg:

“I could see nothing but advantages to training with someone like Lendl, because he hit so hard. You realised then that others didn’t do that. He mostly wanted to train early in the morning and I preferred to train on centre court. That worked well, because at that time of the day, the centre court was generally empty.”

Now it was all about match play, and Stefan knew that the key to the match’s result lay with him. The only thing that tainted his comparative optimism was the fact that the quarter-final had been scheduled for evening. Stefan felt that was not at all ideal. He knew his fast serves bit harder in the heat than in the cool of evening, and that the noisy atmosphere of evening matches could distract him. The floodlights made it harder to locate the ball close to the net, and made volley play – his signature – trickier.

In the introductory games, he played better than he’d done all year. The first and second sets went quickly. Edberg lost the third set, but took command in the fourth, and with the help of a couple of exquisite backhand passes, he gave himself four match points. On the first two, Stefan had a chance to hit a simple forehand into a more or less empty court – but hit both into the net. With two aces, Lendl turned the tables and forced a fifth set.

You only had to look at the expression on Edberg’s face to see that he was close to falling into that sullen mood that his coach Tony Pickard so desperately wished he would keep himself out of. It was almost eleven p.m. Edberg was tired and had just wasted his chance of a good night’s sleep. Instead he’d be forced to drag himself through yet another five set match.

For Ivan Lendl, the situation was the exact opposite. Up until now, Edberg had had the audience on his side, but those four saved match points showed a Lendl on his way towards wrenching himself out of the Swede’s grip – an underdog on the comeback, who the audience wanted to help. When the players returned to their chairs to gather strength ahead of the deciding set, the audience stood up and yelled Lendl’s name.

Stefan kept up in the fifth, but the feeling was that he was headed for defeat. Then the rain came.

“There was nothing for it but to pack and head out. I was annoyed at having missed a chance, but thought too that a continuation in daylight, under new conditions, could work in my favour. As we travelled home in

the dark I thought about my missed chances – and started laughing. I thought to myself: ‘It is what it is. This is my match.’ I slept well that night.”

In the late morning sun, the players started where they’d left off. They were exhausted, but Edberg looked wired. He spurred himself on, clenched his fist, jumped around.

The CBS commentators noticed the Swede’s mood. If you remember... The talk so many times... when this guy would be down and out and get that hang-dog look on his face. But that’s just not true anymore. This is another Stefan. He has proven time and again in this US Open that he can battle, proven he’s matured and not only an elegant player who can win when he’s ahead and at his best.”

At 2-2 in the tie-break of the deciding set, Stefan got a dead net. He stopped short, laughed, bent down and kissed the net. On match point, a stiff, unmoving Lendl only got managed to frame a long shot from Edberg, and the ball shot up into the stands. Edberg tripped over to the net and thumped Lendl on the back in a friendly embrace. Then he got a massage, took a warm shower, went home and prepared himself for the next day’s match against Michael Chang being even tougher.

Again he went to bed early, got up early, arrived early at the court. The semi-final started just after eleven a.m. Not until five thirty in the afternoon did it finish: against Chang, every ball tended to be a long one.

Chang was often described as fanatical, he was deeply religious and many of the players were irritated by Chang’s way of thanking God after a victory. In reality, they were probably more irritated by the way this short player ran to retrieve every ball, even those that looked impossible. If Edberg hit a mediocre smash, Chang was there, took it on the bounce and directed it past Stefan. Chang always punished you if you weren’t sharp enough. All players were nervous playing opponents like that, who forced them to play perfectly.

Stefan didn’t play perfectly. He missed tons of easy shots, flunked the first set, lost service game after service game, but managed to break Chang just as often, taking home the second and third by a hair’s breadth. In the fifth set, Chang took a 3-0 lead. Chang was eight years younger than Stefan and had played less on his way to the semi-final. As the match entered its fifth hour the defender of the title didn’t have much in his favour.

In Sweden, it was already past eleven p.m. The match was broadcast to households that had the satellite channel TV3, but most tennis enthusiasts were informed that the national radio, which had finally sent a reporter over to New York, would be broadcasting a short report. When the station's sports reporter came on air just after the news, he reported that Stefan was down by 3-0 and by 15-30, and would probably soon be knocked out.

Just as Chang readied himself for the deathblow, Edberg grabbed the last weapon he had, the only one he knew: his volley. Two spectacular balls kept him in the match, and suddenly, when he most needed it, he started hitting aces out of Chang's reach. It was enough to turn the match. On TV3 John-Anders Sjögren said he'd never seen Stefan serving better. He wasn't thinking about the 20 double faults from the match's first half. Stefan Edberg was in his second consecutive US Open final.

There was only one problem. He was totally exhausted.

Pickard tried to convince him the tiredness was nothing to worry about: "When you're winning you feel nothing. If you've made it through this ordeal and won, you'll feel no tiredness." But the fact remained: Stefan had played five-set matches in the fourth round, the quarter-final and the semi-final. He'd been behind with a service game behind in the fifth set against all his opponents. He'd played more tennis on the way to a Grand-Slam final than any other player since the beginning of the 50s.

"When I awoke on the morning of the final, I could feel it. I could barely get out of bed. And my morning walk, with a bit of light jogging, was next to impossible. Every joint and muscle ached. The idea of me playing a final at four o'clock that afternoon felt like a joke."

The fact that he was to face Pete Sampras, who'd easily beaten Courier in spite of acute stomach pains towards the end of the match, was something he didn't want to think about.

After his walk, Stefan read the New York Times, which had an article on the front page about a man who was out camping, got lost, couldn't find any food, and in the end lay down with the cassette player he had with him, and recorded all his thoughts on his inescapable death out there in the wilderness.

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

Mats Holm & Ulf Roosvald

Stefan himself was about to go out into the wilderness, millions of people would see him die an inescapable tennis death against one of the greatest talents he'd faced; a player whose serves would whistle past him.

"The warm-up was awful. I was hitting poorly and everything hurt. I knew it would be impossible. But somehow, your body and mind go into match mode, there's some clock that tells your body it's time."

At the beginning of the match, Edberg was nowhere near Sampras's serve.

"I said to myself: 'you played for five hours yesterday, don't expect too much today. Just try to have fun and do what you can.' I also thought about Sampras's situation. He was full of self-confidence. But when you've won as many matches as he had, you've almost forgotten what it feels like to lose. You only need things to start going a little wrong for everything to go wrong."

In the second set, Edberg's body started to wake up, and the Swede managed to equalise. The third set was the key to the match. Sampras served for the set but wobbled, and when Edberg won the tie-break, Sampras's resistance was gone. Just over half an hour later, Stefan hit match point, rushed to the net, embraced his opponent, jogged up to the stands, hugged Annette Olsen, got a hug from Pickard.

It was a big win. Not the most beautiful, but the biggest in his career. The journalist Bernie Lindcrome of the Chicago Tribune described it best the next day, under the title "A Robot Joins the Human Race": "Stefan Edberg looks better with callouses. He not only won his second straight U.S. Open tennis championship Sunday, but gained lasting definition as well. He has been the blankest of recent male champions, as impeccable as porcelain, as incendiary as chalk. And now he is one of us, capable of butchering the easy volley, perfectly able to throw one double fault on top of another. In one tough, seemingly endless tennis tournament, Edberg has shown us more about himself than he could, or would, ever tell, a survivor who can take a punch, go the distance and overcome his own inadequacies, something that had not come up before."

Looking back, it's possible to say that no tennis tournament, before or since, has had a comparable line-up. The 1992 US Open was in many ways the tournament of the twentieth century, and Stefan Edberg won it. No one can ever accuse him of lacking the fighting spirit.

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

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Stefan's victory came days before Sweden was hit by an economic crisis that culminated in the central bank's repo rate being suddenly increased to 500 per cent. The shockwaves from the rate rise that forced many Swedes to leave their homes also led to the introduction of a new economic policy.

The old pension system was scrapped and replaced with a new one that was considerably less comprehensive. The change became a symbol for the fact that the Swedish welfare state as the populace had come to know it was undergoing an unprecedented restructuring.

The US Open victory was to be Stefan Edberg's last Grand Slam title, and the last victory for Swedish tennis during those golden years.

Translated from the Swedish by Nichola Smalley