

BORIS BECKER

Published 3.7.17

Federer is looking fresh, fit and motivated

It's hard to look beyond the defending champion, Andy Murray, and Roger Federer, as favourites to win the silver salver in Wimbledon. That said, it might just be the short-sightedness of us experts since it's always hard to discount the likes of Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal, both of whom have won Wimbledon multiple times.

For Murray, Wimbledon is always special and now that he has won twice, he seems to have learnt to live with the pressure and expectations from the adoring home crowd. He had a very forgettable first half of the season but did find some rhythm at the French Open. It helps that he has a settled set-up with Jamie Murray and Ivan Lendl forming the core of a very stable support team. I just am not convinced that he is in peak fitness and perhaps that's all that can keep him away from the top spot here.

Federer has paced his run-up to the Wimbledon rather well. He forsook the clay season to ensure that his body and mind were fresh for the grass circuit. He then opted to play two warm-up tournaments, was ousted in one and won at Halle. The latter win must be particularly heartening since it was against Alexander Zverev, one of the big stars of the future. Federer is looking fresh, fit and motivated which in itself is a remarkable feat for a 35-year-old. The Australian Open win must also have made him believe what I personally have believed always – that he is one of the favourites in any Grand Slam.

The other two players who can never be too far away from a discussion on Grand Slam favourites are Nadal and Djokovic. Nadal has been looking as fit as he ever has been and has a serious and real chance in this tournament. He is set to meet Murray in the semi-finals but I doubt he is thinking that far at the moment. The challenge for Nadal at Wimbledon has always been the fact that he starts slow and often gets ousted in the first week itself! If the champion can last out the first week, he will build enough momentum to go the distance. On grass, Nadal just gets better and more comfortable with every passing round. For Djokovic, too, it's the first round that might be challenging. He has a new team and coach so it would be interesting to see what impact that has on the former champion.

Among the young players I feel Nicholas Kyrgios has the game that's most suited to grass. However, I am not sure where he is mentally and that might be a problem. Zverev, too, plays well on grass and is a clever player so he would fancy his chances. Dominc Thiem, who was so impressive in the clay season, might just be a little less comfortable and I would be surprised, and impressed, if he goes far.

The guys below the radar are the eternal underdog Stanislas Wawrinka and Milos Raonic. The latter is an excellent player on grass and really could challenge the whole lot of favourites if his first serve lasts the two weeks. (Gameplan)

Published 10.7.17

Novak's body language is more positive

The middle Sunday of Wimbledon seems to have been designed for us to pause and reflect. And as I reflect, I wonder, are we in a time machine that has taken us back to 2009? Rafael Nadal looks at his fittest and is playing with enough flair and authority to be considered a firm favourite for next Sunday. Roger Federer, too, is playing well within himself to ensure that he has the legs and energy for the decisive end of the tournament. And right behind them are Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray. I am quite certain I would have said exactly this in 2009-10!

But that's the way things stand at the moment. With the exception of Stan Wawrinka's exit there has been no real upset so far. What has been upsetting is the disproportionate number of injury retirements in the first round. The ATP has rules in place to prevent this happening in their tournaments, but the ITF has not taken these rules on board. The fact is that the player who loses in the first round gets GBP 35000 and that's a lot of money. Since they are not breaking any rule players reckon they might as well turn up. I suspect we will see new rules on this matter in place by the US Open.

Coming back to the fray, Nadal looks rejuvenated and as good as new after the French Open. He will get even better as the grass dries up and the courts slow down. He is strong, has been serving consistently and seems to be chasing down balls exactly the way he used to a decade ago. I had said he would be a contender if he survives the first week. He has not merely survived, he has overpowered all his opponents and looks to be in the form of his life. It is hard to see him not go far if he keeps it up.

Murray, on the other hand, was tested and had to dig deep to survive the first week. It was an electric match as he was stretched by Fognini with the crowds really getting behind the home boy. The cheering and encouragement that Murray receives has always been incredible, but the Scotsman is learning to enjoy it and use it to his advantage better with every passing year. There was talk about a hip injury that had hampered the early part of this year. However, he is now looking pretty good and as defending champion he is clearly in good form – the forehand and the legs have both gained strength -- and in no mood to relinquish his title.

The other guy who seems to have got his mojo back is Djokovic. He, too, has played a faultless first week under the watchful eye of Andre Agassi. The latter seems to have helped the former champion find some energy and focus. Djokovic looks a lot more in the game this tournament, with the fist pumps and screams coming back into his body language. Hopefully the withdrawn, listless Djokovic is a thing of the past. He has a tough path from here on and needs every ounce of focus to make him go the distance.

And that brings us to the crowd favourite (just a notch below Murray!), Federer. He is looking like he is playing within himself so that he has the energy and power to get deep into the tournament. He has not been tested too hard which would be a relief for him, and now the question is whether he has it in him to power past younger opponents and go the distance.

The young guns have also passed into the second week quietly. Alexander Zverev is looking really good and so are Milos Raonic, Dimitrov and Thiem. The latter is not a natural grasscourt player but he has shown fine form so far. While the focus is on the 'big four', these guys are closing in and not that far anymore.

Across in the women's side, the incredible achievement of Victoria Azarenka has to be the standout performance. To be playing a Grand Slam six months after delivering a baby is really beyond belief. We thought Serena Williams pushed the boundaries of what's possible with her Australian Open win during her first trimester. This just pushes it further. The girls have not seen too many upsets, and most of the seeds are in the fray. That said, there is so little to separate the players that anybody who has a good week from now can win.

A deciding factor will be the heat. Wimbledon has started a week later than it traditionally does so that players have a little time after the French Open – a move that I thoroughly approve of. However, it has been an unusually hot summer here and the grass is burning and drying fast, making the courts a little slower. This might work in the favour of some of the players – I can see a certain Spaniard smile! (Gameplan)

Published 14.7.17

Berdych will have to play out of his skin to beat Federer

The last four in the men's side of the tournament is completely different from what was shaping up on the middle weekend. An upset and some injuries have resulted in three less fancied men joining the King in the last four. That said, I can say that only 10 players in current world tennis can be considered grass court specialists, and four of them are in the fray.

The King: That's the only way to describe the regal manner in which Roger Federer has dismissed all his opponents. I had predicted that he was the firm favourite to win the tournament and all I can do is emphasise that. He was in sublime touch against Milos Raonic on Wednesday. He was returning with such speed that Raonic was unable to get to the net in time and, when he stayed on the baseline, Federer was achieving incredible angles on his forehand. It was complete mastery of the court from the seven-time champion as he cruised into the last four.

He is now against Thomas Berdych who came through after an injured Novak Djokovic had to retire from his match. Berdych has always done well here and looks in very good form at Wimbledon after a very patchy start to the year. He has his task cut out against Federer, though, but he has beaten the Swiss maestro in the past and knows he can do it again. It's important for him to enjoy the fact that he has nothing to lose and, yes, a good start would help.

Sam Querrey made headlines when he defeated Djokovic last year. This time he has done it again by breaking British hearts while getting past defending champion Andy Murray. The latter, too, was not in any condition to play, and it was terrible to see him hobble off. Both Murray and Djokovic are thirty years old and should look at the longer run rather than putting their careers and records on the line. Coming into a Grand Slam with an injury is never a good idea.

Though a beneficiary of Murray's injury, Querrey is a natural on grass and I think he will test Marin Cilic in the semis. He just needs to get that incredible serve going and also work on his recovery after the Murray match. Cilic, the dark horse of the tournament, will be pleased with his win against Gilles Muller. The latter was exceptional against Rafael Nadal but showed incredible fitness to test Cilic.

My predictions? It's hard to dismiss any of these grass court specialists. But unless Berdych plays out of his skin, he won't be able to get past Federer. As for the Querrey-Cilic match, it's just too close to call. (Gameplan)

Published 15.7.17

History beckons Muguruza, but she has to get past an in-form Venus

Over the last 20 years almost every women's final at Wimbledon has always had one Williams or the other, if not both, and 2017 will be no different. Venus, who is the Williams in this final, is one of the most natural grass court players and, like Roger Federer, it is a testimony to her fitness that she has outrun, outserved and quite, simply, outplayed players who were toddlers when she started her career!

Venus was outstanding against Ostapenko in the quarterfinals, and if anything, she was even better against the home favourite Johanna Konta. The latter was in scorching form in the quarterfinals against Simona Halep, with her serve as well as her groundstrokes really catching the Romanian off guard. However, she seemed unable to achieve momentum or rhythm on her serve and Williams was way too experienced not to move in for the kill.

The women's tournament has seen less upsets than earlier Grand Slams and the matches have been of the highest quality, at least till the semi-finals stage where both matches were a little one-sided.

Garbine Muguruza was absolutely scorching against Rybarikova. The Spaniard is now in her third Grand Slam final which speaks quite well of her consistency in the big tournaments. She was in the final here against Serena Williams two years ago. She was pretty impressive in that match, which announced her arrival at the top level of the game. Last year, she did exceedingly well to win against Serena at the French Open final.

Powerful groundstrokes and a good serve will make her a strong opponent for Venus. She also has a good head on her shoulders and tends to play big points well, without being overawed by her opponents.

The absence of Serena and, to a lesser extent, of Maria Sharapova, has been telling on the women's circuit. However, some of the young players are looking good, and more importantly, are looking consistent. We will see a lot more of Muguruza and Konta and hopefully these women will give the circuit some stability.

Coming back to Saturday, it's hard to look past Venus if she continues in this form. However, Muguruza looked very, very good in her semi-final, and seems to be enjoying playing on grass. Who knows, she may make history as the first Spanish champion on the women's side since Conchita Martinez. She had fought hard against Serena in 2015; she will be even stronger this time. (Gameplan)

Published 16.7.17

Cilic has the goods, but Federer has the mental edge

The final will see a very talented and in-form player, who is making the finals for the first time in 11 years, take on a legend who is playing his eleventh Wimbledon final. Marin Cilic would not be the guy one expected here but that does not mean he has not been part of the conversations that pundits have been having regarding possible contenders. He has featured in many lists as a dark horse and he has the goods to trouble even the Swiss legend.

Roger Federer, on the other hand, is enjoying his tennis; he has looked absolutely invincible in every match and has been a firm favourite right from the start. What has changed for Federer in 2017? From what I see, I think it is his mindset. He knows that even though he is playing unbelievably well, he does not have much time on the circuit. This is making him cherish and enjoy his big matches more.

On Friday, he was tested at every step along the way by Thomas Berdych. The latter is always very, very good on grass but Federer had an answer to his strategy. The seven-time champion is serving so well that he can concentrate on the return and on his forehand. Though Federer might not want to admit it, he was really keyed up for the game on Friday. He has lost to Berdych and he wanted to play the perfect game against the Czech. I rarely hear Federer go at himself in Swiss-German but there were moments when he was scolding himself in his native tongue – not something he does too often!

I would have to say that if Federer continues this form he would be very hard to beat. He knows how to win and seems to be feeling very good about his fitness. He has not been tested too much so there is no question of any wear and tear or fatigue. If he serves as well as he has been doing through the tournament that will make it even harder for Cilic on Sunday.

That said, the Croatian knows how to beat Federer, even at Wimbledon. He had match point against the Swiss last year and he would want to rediscover that kind of form. Cilic, unlike other very tall players, is very agile and covers the court well. He has a huge weapon in his serve and he will be depending heavily on that. That, along with his court coverage and big hitting, will make him a worthy finalist. Make no mistake: he has the goods to go past Federer. Federer only has the edge because of where he is mentally. Even on Friday, there were moments when Cilic was looking a bit under the pump mentally and that's something Federer would use to his advantage.

A word on Sam Querrey. He played an incredible first set on Friday and looked very fit and fresh even though he had played a clutch of five-setters. He was threatening to take the match into the fifth set but Cilic held his nerve and managed to claw back in the fourth and finally won. However, Querrey seems to have made good progress in the last 12 months and I predict good things for him in the hard court season.

The men's draw has shown good depth and quality in this edition of Wimbledon. It showed experts like us that there is life beyond the big four and that's really good news. Coming back to Sunday's final, I predict a top quality encounter but would have to say that Federer has the edge. (Gameplan)

Published 28.8.17

All eyes will be on the Halep-Sharapova match

The final Grand Slam of the season is here and half the top ten players are not playing thanks to injury breaks. Most notable among these is Novak Djokovic, who finally decided to rest and nurse his elbow niggle, and Andy Murray, who has pulled out because of a hip injury that has kept him out of the game since Wimbledon. Stan Wawrinka, Kei Nishikori and a couple of others have also opted out of the US Open because of wear and tear.

While some might have been forced into this break, others seem to have been inspired by the remarkable comebacks of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, both of whom came back from protracted injury breaks to win Grand Slams. This has made players like Djokovic realise that playing smart, and respecting one's body is the way forward.

It is remarkable that Nadal is now top seed, considering how racked by injury he was a couple of seasons ago. Similarly, it's incredible that Roger Federer has won two of the year's three Grand Slams. He is number three, which means that the two are slated to play each other in the semi-finals. I don't really put much by the draw, and both players will have to get that far before we can start talking about that game.

This US Open also offers some of the younger players their best chance yet to finally emerge from the shadow of their seniors. Alexander Zverev, Nicholas Kyrgios and Grigor Dimitrov all have had a good run-up to New York and should consider their chances for a shot at the final pretty seriously. The results at Canada and Cincinnati put Zverev and Kyrgios a little ahead of the rest, but each of these guys have a real chance of getting far. They are all very impressive on the hard court and have beaten the likes of Nadal recently.

I am a little concerned with the performance of Dominic Thiem who started the year well but fell away after the clay court season. This echoes what happened to him last year and he needs to stem this tendency by learning to negotiate the grass-court season better.

Looking over at the women's side, we have a clear-cut favourite in Gabine Muguruza. She has gained in confidence, strength, versatility and tournament play over the last one year and looks distinctly ahead of the competition at this point.

There is also Venus Williams who was so wonderful at Wimbledon this year. Always one of the most articulate players on the circuit, it was sweet to hear that she would be playing both for herself and Serena, who is expecting a baby soon.

However, as the tournament begins, all eyes are on what could go down as the most watched first round match in recent times. Simona Halep will take on Maria Sharapova, who returns after her time away from the game. Both players would be very keen to get past this one. It's being played at the Arthur Ashe Stadium on Monday evening and will be keenly watched to see how the former champion is faring after her forced break from the game. (Gameplan)

Published 9.9.17

Hard to pick a favourite between Stephens and Keys

The women's side of the tournament has been a rollercoaster ride from the start of the tournament, when Maria Sharapova made a sensational comeback against one of the top players in circuit. Her win against Simona Halep raised hopes of a dream comeback for the former champion and while that did not quite go the distance, there was enough quality in Sharapova's campaign to prove that she will be a force to contend with as she gets match fit.

The talking point of the women's side of the tournament was the fact that four Americans made the semi-finals, and the game will see an American champion who is not Serena or Venus Williams after a very long time.

Sloane Stephens was always a player I had a lot of time for and she has been improving steadily over the last few years. Her semi-final against Venus was proof of her power and stamina. I was also impressed by the way she held her nerve in what was the biggest match of her career. I thought she would not be able to come back after Venus made that tremendous turnaround in the second set. Stephens, however, came back from the dead when she was almost out with a stunning backhand volley at 4-5, 30-30. It was the moment that defined the youngster's grit and determination against one of her childhood heroes. It was an emotional and pulsating game and eventually the youngster made it past Venus.

The other match was a little more predictable with the young and exciting Madison Keys getting past CoCo Vandeweghe in straight sets. Keys has been in the form of her life and is finally showing signs of why she came with such a big rap from the junior American circuit.

The tournament also saw the return of Kvitova who recovered from a traumatic knife attack earlier this year. She was quite amazing right through the tournament, and her match against Venus was one of the best I have seen in a long time. She was also very impressive against the top seed Garbine Muguruza when she overpowered the latter.

Looking ahead, I see the all-American final to be a closely fought match between two players who know each others' game very well. They are roughly the same age, though Keys is a bigger and more powerful player. Stephens might benefit from having had a harder-fought semis and that might prove decisive. However, the ladies are really very similar in their game and that makes it very hard to pick a favourite.

Finally a word for Serena who timed her baby with the US Open. We would expect that sort of perfection from the champion, wouldn't we? (Gameplan)

Published on 28.5.17

AGASSI WILL BRING ENJOYMENT TO DJOKOVIC'S GAME

There are three men hungering after the silverware as well as redemption at Paris this next fortnight. And behind them there are a group of younger men who are finally looking like they will be able to step up, close the gap between themselves and the champions who have dominated the sport these last few years.

It has been a wonderful run-up for Rafael Nadal over the past few weeks, and if I were to choose one favourite for the tournament it would be him. Nadal is the greatest clay court player ever and this year he would be truly desperate for a win. At 30-plus he must be hearing the clock ticking and would know that he does not have that many years left for one last championship. Apart from the blip in the Rome Masters against Dominic Thiem, he really has not put a foot wrong during the clay season. Nadal does look formidable and is the man to beat this time round.

The other man in search for redemption is one I know well. Novak Djokovic was at the peak of his tennis powers in Paris this time last year, when he won the one Grand Slam that eluded him. It was an intense moment of joy for him and he had completed a career Slam as well. It's often hard to keep pushing yourself to maintain a high level of performance. After all, it does not happen with a switch of a button. Djokovic did go off the boil for a little bit, with his family and his charities taking up some of his time. However, he was on the way to course correction soon enough. One manifestation of this was in April, when he parted ways with his coaching staff – clearly he wanted to start anew.

The recent teaming up with Andre Agassi is also a decisive move. True, Agassi has never ever coached on the circuit, but his tennis pedigree is impeccable and he has won each of the Grand Slams. Having known him for almost all my life, Agassi might be just the guy for Djokovic at the moment. The man who wore denim and earrings on court was the original rock-and-roller on the circuit and he would add that sense of enjoyment to Djokovic's game. Positive statements are already coming from the defending champion and I see signs of him having rediscovered his mojo. Significantly, Djokovic and Nadal are in the same side of the draw.

The losing finalist last year, Andy Murray, has had a quiet six months. He is the top seed here, and if he plays as well as he did last year, he cannot be counted out. Andy had a wonderful 2016 with wins at Wimbledon and the Olympics. However, his loss at the Australian Open was the start of a less than great year.

And then there is the younger lot who now seem poised to make a play for the Grand Slams. Any player who can beat Nadal on clay has to be special. Thiem was really outstanding with deep ground strokes and incredible retrieving at Rome. Along with Alexander Zverev and Nicholas Kyrgios, a new brigade is ready to take on the old guard. All these youngsters have had impressive tournaments in the run-up to the French Open. However, only time will tell whether they have the depth and intensity to take on the top seeds in a Grand Slam just yet.

And lest we forget, there is Stanislas Wawrinka who is very much in contention for the championship he won two years ago. As always, he is under the radar and is not spoken of as a favourite until he makes it to the quarters. We cannot count him out especially since he has a good draw that should ensure he goes deep into the second week. His illustrious compatriot Roger Federer is not in the fray, and will be missed. Wawrinka now has three Grand Slams in three years and looks in good enough shape to be counted as a contender for the title here. (Gameplan)

Published on 3.6.17

KERBER'S FORM IS WORRISOME

The women's game at the French Open is missing its stars, for sure. The big names are either out, or not playing. The men's side is strong on that count, and I must admit that I'm missing that little bit of the glitz and glamour the ladies bring to the game. We do need a couple of more stars on that side!

With top seed Angelique Kerber losing, a little more shine has been taken off the ladies' side. None of the current players, apart from Garbine Muguruza who is still in the fray having won her match on Friday, have even won a Grand Slam, unless you count Venus Williams, but she's never won here. Now, I think, whoever gets a run will win. You could say Simona Halep and Elina Svitolina are also one of the favourites but the way the women's tournament is going at the moment, I think the defending champion is holding the best cards.

As far as Keber is concerned, I would have to say that Germany is upset, and we are all worried a bit for her because she's been losing quite a lot lately, in the first and second rounds, and she's not won a title this year. She's been having a really troubled year so far. Hopefully, when she gets back to grass – to which her game is well suited – she'll start winning again.

On the men's side, the guys have pretty much been in cruise control. I'd rate the bottom half, which features Rafa, Novak and Thiem, a little bit stronger than the top which has Murray and Stan Wawrinka – a man who nobody talks much about but who I like very much and who, for me, is one of the favourites. All the top guys are well-positioned, haven't shown any weaknesses and are looking good. The big picture is that everything seems to be going to plan, so far, and I think everyone will come through going into the second week.

It was wonderful to see the reception Petra Kvitova got in both of her matches but one of the things I'd like to point out about this year's tournament is that we've seen some real good sportsmanship and fair play amongst the players on both sides. This sets a nice tone and is an example for the youngsters that, of course, winning is important but there a lot more to it than that. A case in point was Del Potro showing his big heart after Nicolas Almagro was forced to pull of their match out on Thursday. So, the players really want to show everybody that they can play fair and that they are good people, and that's nice to see. (Gameplan)

Published on 6.6.17

DJOKOVIC-THIEM COULD BE A CLASSIC

The big news at the start of the second week was women's defending champion, Garbine Muguruza, going out. It was a bit of a surprise as she was always a favourite but Kristina Mladenovic, who is French, got carried by the crowd. She started off very well and it is always a good sign when the underdog gets out of the blocks and wins the first set. Garbine came back in the second set but Kiki took control early in the third, had the first break and just kept holding serve, and kept on the pressure. I think the crowd, too, got to Garbine a lot through the middle and end of the third set and you could see that in her press conference afterwards. She had a breakdown, started crying and stopped the interaction. That's how much she was affected by the situation. I felt a little sorry for her, but unfortunately that's part of the game.

The big match on Tuesday, the first day of the quarter finals, is Djokovic-Thiem. That has all the ingredients of a classic. You have the defending champion, a real superstar in the game, against a potential future Grand Slam champion and super star. They played in Rome, in the semi-finals and Novak just blew past him. But Thiem is very good on clay. He recently beat Nadal on clay in Rome and I rate him extremely high. I really like the guy; he's humble, hardworking, and wants to win.

Nadal plays Pablo Carreño Busta in another quarter-final. I'm very impressed with Nadal altogether from the early rounds till now. He is the man in form, a man on a mission. He plays an extremely high standard of tennis and, in particular against Spanish players against whom he has a perfect record on clay and that speaks for itself. So anything but a victory would be a big surprise.

On the ladies side, I really like Simona Halep's form. She seems to be a real contender now. At the start of the tournament, I said Halep could be a favourite. But now, early in the second week, she hasn't lost a set, she's playing with a lot of confidence and power. She's a small girl but has powerful groundstrokes. I talked to her on Sunday and she has a nice calmness about her. Of course, she has expectations, but she's not nervous; just very calm and confident.

Caroline Wozniacki, who can be erratic, really clawed her way up the rankings last year. She made the semi-finals of the US Open last year and, even though clay is not her best surface, she's a natural groundstroke player and is very light on her feet. I think that her vast experience of being on top of the Tour for many years works in her favour.

The second week is when the tournament really starts. In the first, everyone gets into position, all the favourites look to come through comfortably without losing too much time. The second week, however, is like a new tournament and everybody goes for broke. Now is the time to shine.
(Gameplan)

Published on 9.6.17

CAN'T SEE THIEM BEATING AN IN-FORM NADAL

The semifinalist line-up is not terribly unexpected, and it's wonderful to see young Dominic Thiem in the final four of a Grand Slam. The only disappointment was the manner in which Novak Djokovic let his frustrations get the better of him. I have been close to Djokovic and it was difficult for me to watch being on air during that last set against Thiem. The defending champion was going at full tilt in the first set and half of the second set. However, from then on he seemed to lose rhythm and then was totally frustrated.

What does Djokovic do from here? The big positive is that he has brought Andre Agassi on board as his super coach. The former champion was not there during the second week because of a prior commitment. However, I hope that he will be there full-time for at least the Grand Slams from here on. A full-time coach and a fitness trainer also are required at the moment. With due respect to Djokovic's brother, he cannot bring in the urgent changes that are required for the former champion to regain his earlier form and consistency.

Having said all this, let us not take away a lot of credit from young Thiem. He has been having an exceptional clay court season and was really playing clever and brave tennis on Wednesday. He comes up against Rafael Nadal on Friday, just a few weeks after beating the great Spaniard in Rome. It's going to take a Herculean effort to defeat Djokovic and Nadal in three days and the youngster is up against it. Nadal is my favourite to win the tournament and I can't see Thiem getting past him.

It's great to see Nadal healthy and fit after such a long time, years in fact. The break he took last year from October to December has done him a world of good. He is almost as good as new on the court and really looks like the favourite to win here on Sunday. The addition of Carlos Moya as a super coach seems to have given his preparation an extra dimension. A new perspective and approach can help even the greatest ever clay court player.

On the other half, Stan Wawrinka is once again showing why he is the most underrated champion in tennis at the moment. He has not dropped a set and has gotten this far – testimony to his form. He loves being in Paris, speaks fluent French and has won many admirers here over the last few years. I see him progress to the final once again, as he is really playing a good, deep game with his backhands really flourishing.

Andy Murray was under the radar at the start of the tournament since he has had a very poor season this year. However, he is looking happier and getting better with every match in the tournament. He now has won three Grand Slams and knows how to pace himself in a tournament. The semi-final between him and Stan is really too close to call but I would give the Swiss champion the edge. (Gameplan)

Published on 13.6.17

NADAL DEMOLISHES THIEM TO WIN 10TH FRENCH OPEN

La Decima or should we say the Decimation – such was the dominance of Rafael Nadal as he conquered Roland Garros for a record 10th time. At the start of the tournament there was no doubt in my mind that Nadal was the man to beat. He had had a near perfect run-up to the tournament and was looking as fit as he was five years ago.

The last two matches of the tournament proved that Nadal has got a few Grand Slams in him. He was clinical in his demolition of Dominic Thiem, the man who had defeated him in Rome just a few weeks ago. However, Nadal is a different player when he is at the Philippe Chatrier Arena and the Austrian was not allowed to settle at all. The power and aggression he brought to the semi-finals showed that he was confident about his fitness and clearly Thiem has some way to go before taking on the maestro in his favourite venue. I hope Thiem, Nikolas Kyrgios and Alexander Zverev all continue to improve in order for us to see these youngsters in big games over the next few Grand Slams.

Coming back to Nadal's remarkable 10th French Open, there will be many who would be disappointed at how Stanislas Wawrinka was unable to put up any resistance before the Spaniard in the final. A couple of things went against Wawrinka on Sunday. First, the four-hour marathon to get past top-seed Andy Murray did impact his energy levels. His game was just a shade below its normal power and at this level that can break your strategy. Further, Wawrinka was unable to grab his opportunities in the first set. He did have a couple of break points early in the first set which he was unable to capitalise on. In fact, the first set scoreline is a little misleading as the points were really closely fought. However, once that set was won by Nadal, he was like a runaway freight train that was really hard to catch.

What made Nadal's win so remarkable was the fact that he was able to dominate each point so completely even against a former champion like Wawrinka. Such was the force of his groundstrokes, as well as his incredible reach. I don't think I have seen him so fleet-footed in his court coverage in a long, long time.

So now, when we look at the first two Grand Slams of the year, we have a challenge to the hegemony of Novak Djokovic and Murray. However, it's coming in the form of a resurgent Roger Federer and a reinforced Nadal. The new rankings show Djokovic at number four which would not please him as he gets ready for Wimbledon. However, he has to work on his game and brace himself for the challenge that lies ahead. The same applies for Murray who has had a rather dull first half of the year, save for his semi-final at the French. Interesting times lie ahead with the big four and Wawrinka once again forming a huddle that's pulling away from the rest of the contenders. (Gameplan)