

Decline and Fall of American Tennis Evident at U.S. Open

Washington: As Tim Smyczek labored valiantly on Sunday night to stay alive in the third round U.S. Open in New York's Flushing Meadows, a cry went out in the half-empty, but noisy and jingoistic stands: "You are our last hope!" It ignited a chant of "USA! USA!" and spurred Smyczek for a bit longer, but he finally ran out of gas and lost 5-7 in the fifth set. With that he became the last of the 15 American men in the main draw who fell short of the quarterfinal.



(Photos by Chidu Rajghatta)

As autumn creeps into America, sportscasters and tennis fans are agonizing about the fall of U.S. tennis and wondering how it will get past the winter. Just how much of a freezing funk has American tennis gotten into you want to know? The country which produced Jimmy Connors, John McEnroe, and Pete Sampras among scores of Top 100 players does not have don't have a single man in the round of 16 -- forget the quarterfinal -- at their own Grand Slam for the first time since the tournament started in 1881!

More depressing numbers for America: There isn't a single American man in the top ten, and there are only three in the top 50. An American has not won a Grand Slam on the men's side in ten years. In 1983, the top 10 American men were all ranked among the top 17 of the ATP rankings. Thirty years later, the top American man is ranked No.17 (John Isner) and the 10th-ranked U.S. player is a lowly No. 116 in the world.

Things have gotten particularly bad in the last five-six years: America hasn't had ten men in the top 100 at this point of the season for six straight years. In contrast, American men had more than one player in the top 10 in seventeen out of nineteen years leading up to 2007. From 1989-2003, American men combined to win 28 Grand Slam singles titles. Connors and McEnroe dominated the 80s, Sampras, Agassi, and Courier the 90s.

Roddick hung in for the much of the 2000s, but could win only one Grand Slam before retiring this year. "Without Andy Roddick to put lipstick on the pig, things are looking quite bleak at the moment," Tennis Now noted dourly, advising fans to "cue up those classic Agassi or McEnroe highlights and try not to get too upset," because although "the empire has crumbled, but we've still got the memories."

Americans, especially tennis fans, can be intensely patriotic. The sport, particularly Davis Cup, generates more nationalism compared to American football or basketball, where competition is largely domestic and inter-state or inter-club. This correspondent was witness to the greatest outpouring of nationalistic emotion on a tennis court when the United States took on India a Davis Cup tie in Winston-Salem in 2001, the first big sporting event in U.S after 9/11. It made even the strong-hearted Leander Paes go weak in the knees.

But last month, when Somdev Devvarman took on American John Isner at the Washington CitiBank Open, there were as many people cheering the Indian as the American. The stadium was also only partly full, attesting to the decline of popularity of tennis.

Experts say among the reasons for the decline is the rise of competing alternative sports with stars of greater appeal – think Tiger Woods and gold.

"The economic reality of sport is that when there are many competing alternatives for a young athlete's time, attention, and imagination, they get pulled in many directions but ultimately may choose the sport with the more visibility and sex appeal. Right now in America, tennis isn't winning that battle," according to Patrick Rishe, of the Walker School of Business at Webster University, who first wrote about the decline of American tennis in 2011.

Woods, Rishe wrote, raised the profile of golf in America single-handedly because of his supreme greatness coupled with achieving such heights at such a young age and being the first dominant African-American star of his sport. The prospect of a "Tiger-like effect" on the American tennis scene hasn't been on the horizon despite an occasional James Blake or Donald Young.

By the way, Smyczek lost to Marcel Granollers of Spain, the new tennis superpower.