

MATCHLESS PROs

WILL RAFAEL NADAL SUCCEED IN HIS ATTEMPT TO DISPLACE BJORN BORG AS THE FIRST MAN TO ACHIEVE FIVE FRENCH OPEN SINGLES TITLES? JASON DASEY ASSESSES THE SPANIARD'S FORM

YOU see the kid over here... he's going to be something special one day." It was August 2003 and the prediction about Rafael Nadal came from former Asian number one Vijay Amritraj as we worked together covering the US Open at Flushing Meadows for STAR Sports across Asia.

In only his second Grand Slam tennis tournament, Nadal was barely 17 years old, a few centimetres shorter and playing before sparse, day session crowds at the USTA National Tennis Center during the first week of the tournament. That year, Andy Roddick won his one and only Grand Slam tournament while Andre Agassi and James Blake were among the other big local drawcards.

Nadal made it to the second round in New York before losing in straight sets to number 22 seed Younes El Aynaoui of Morocco. With a shaggy hairstyle and street-style clothes, the Spanish left-hander was an unlikely tennis superstar in the making, but even then, his muscular, power-packed style gave a hint of things to come.

As the word about him spread across the ATP circuit like Chinese whispers, Nadal won two Challenger titles to finish that year in the top 50, the second youngest in history to be ranked so high.

But a series of injuries – including a stress fracture of his left ankle – meant that it wasn't until 2005 that Nadal played the French Open for the first time and his career really took off. Since then, he's never been beaten on the red clay of Roland Garros, claiming four titles and 28 consecutive victories.

Later this month, Nadal tries to make history by extending that Paris winning streak to 35 matches and lifting the Coupe des Mousquetaires for an unprecedented fifth consecutive time.

With the Australian Open and Wimbledon crowns now in his trophy cabinet, Nadal now has six Grand Slams to his name, including three out of the last four, plus the Beijing Olympics' gold medal, which he won last August soon after claiming the world number one ranking. His Melbourne Park success in January made him the first man since Agassi to grab Major titles on three different surfaces.

Nadal's dominance of his biggest rival, Roger Federer, has become so lopsided – his dominance in the Aussie Open final was his 13th in 19 career meetings against the once unbeatable player – that injury rather than any particular opponent is seen as the main obstacle to the 22-year-old setting the all-time record for Grand Slam singles' titles. Pete has 14 Major titles while Federer is stuck on 13 after falling to Nadal in the Rod Laver Arena in January. It was his third Grand Slam final defeat in a row to his nemesis.

"Unless Nadal gets a bad injury, I am backing him to beat the record," said Mark Kratzmann, the Hong Kong-based coach and former Australian Davis. "Hw will win the French three to four more times and could pick up as many as eight in the other Grand Slams over time."

With success at Melbourne Park and the All England Club, Nadal has completed difficult transition that previous kings of clay like Gustavo Kuerten, Sergi Bruguera and Thomas Muster were never able to make. A combination of being a left-hander and hitting with so much topspin means Nadal is a potent opponent when facing right-handers like Federer. Indeed, it was fellow lefty Fernando Verdasco who gave Nadal his toughest match at the Australian Open in an epic, five-hour semi-final.

"One of the most difficult aspects of playing Nadal is that his balls are fast, high and create great angles," said Dr Choi Hee-june, tennis director at Mission Hills Golf Club near Shenzhen and coach of two-time Grand Slam doubles champion Yan Zi. "Keeping up with Nadal for just one set is demanding enough but after that it is almost impossible."



Kratzmann added: "The constant pressure his heavy crosscourt forehand builds on the right-hander's backhand means that opponents need to take an extra two to three steps per shot which adds up to extra kilometres during a five set match."

What makes Nadal even harder to beat is his athleticism from the baseline with a foot speed almost matching the velocity of his ferocious ground strokes. However, in a relatively short career, he's had so many leg injuries – including knee tendonitis that cut short his 2008 season – that some experts predict that a decline in his physical prowess will bring a premature end to his dominance.

But not Kratzmann not Dr Choi. They say that instead of following the pattern of former Grand Slam champion Guillermo Vilas, the powerful Argentine of the 1970s and 80s who won three tournaments after his 30th birthday.

"Chang and Hewitt are counter punchers but Nadal has massive weapons from both sides so although it looks like he's working hard, I don't think it's going to bother him in the long-term," Kratzmann said.

Dr Choi said: "Although his style is physically demanding, I expect him to have a long career. He is capable of winning many more Grand Slam titles on all surfaces including grass."

Injury permitting, Nadal will be an almost unbackable favourite at the French Open to take glory for that fifth consecutive time which would see him surpassing Bjorn Borg's men's record of four straight titles.

Last year at Roland Garros, I did the second of two one-on-one interviews for ESPN soon after he handed out a worst-ever Grand Slam thrashing to Federer in the final, conceding a mere four games.

Unlike the gracious Federer, who patiently does almost endless interviews in English, French and Swiss-German, Nadal clearly enjoys the process a lot less and prefers to keep his answers on a more practical level, rolling his eyes at repeated questions about his place in tennis history. Even so, there's something likeable about the young man from Majorca.

"Hi Rafael... Jason Dasey from ESPN," I said, extending my hand, camera crew in tow, inside the cramped interview room at Roland Garros. "I know. How are you doing?" he asked, matter-of-factly, as he folded his arms and braced himself for many of the same questions for the umpteenth time that first Friday evening in June, soon after his 22nd birthday.

Later, Nadal noticeably warmed up when CNN's Portuguese reporter Pedro Pinto joked with him in Spanish, probably discussing his beloved Real Madrid, ahead of yet another inquisition. Nadal, who barely spoke English when he first came onto the ATP Tour, is still less than eloquent outside his native tongue.

During the interviews, Nadal wore his own personalised "Marquer Histoire" (To Mark History) polo shirt in which the years of his French Open victories were written in a single column and crossed off in almost routine fashion.

It's a pretty good bet that the year 2009 will also have a line through it soon on what is becoming a rather crowded breast pocket for Spain's irresistible force. ■

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