

SPORT

SERVING IT UP IN STYLE

JASON DASEYDONS HIS BEST BIB AND TUCKER FOR
THE FRENCH OPEN

Mention the names Iva Majoli, Gaston Gaudio and Albert Costa to anyone but a hard-core tennis fan and you're likely to get a shrug of the shoulders and a blank expression.

But within the last dozen years, they've been able to achieve something that legends John McEnroe, Stefan Edberg and Martina Hingis never did: win a singles title at Roland Garros.

Add the likes of Martin Verkerk, Mariano Puerta and Andrei Medvedev and you're getting even obscure...but as recent finalists, they went further at the French Open than Boris Becker and even the great Pete Sampras ever did. The 14-time Grand Slam champion's best result was a semi-final appearance in 1996: eight times Pistol Pete lost in the first two rounds.

The year's second major championship – and the only one played on clay – is pretty much a law unto itself and what happens during the two weeks in Paris sometimes has little relevance to the rest of the tennis year.

Officially, the tournament isn't the French Open but the Tournoi de Roland Garros, named after a World War I aviator, Roland Garros, who had no connection to tennis. Curiously, neither Philippe Chatrier, the administrator who has the centre court dedicated to him, or 12-time Grand Slam singles champion Suzanne Lenglen – the inspiration for the second most important court – also never actually struck a ball in anger in the stadium.

It was built in just nine months between 1927 and 1928 – after Lenglen had retired – in the wake of France's Davis Cup victory over the United States by a group of national players known affectionately as the Four Musketeers. As the hosts, the French needed an appropriate venue for their Davis Cup defence.

A dozen years later, when Paris was occupied by the Germans during World War II, Roland Garros was used as a prison camp for Jews. Those "dark days" aren't mentioned in the French Federation's official literature, but one former inmate recalls sleeping with 600 others beneath the stairways and seeing the names of famous players on the scoreboard during supervised walks around the stadium.

Away from the courts, the French Open also stands apart... and is in stark contrast to the All England Championships, which follow just four three weeks later, across the Channel.

Compared to suburban Wimbledon's distance from central London, Roland

Garros is closer to the heart of the city in Paris' 16th arrondissement at the fashionable La Porte d'Auteuil.

There is no dress-code, but even the casual fan might feel self-conscious alongside the finely-cut business suits and elegant gowns of the professional people who come directly from the office.

That is not to say that the complex is stuffy: quite the contrary. On the edge of the Bois de Boulogne via lines 9 and 10 on the Paris Metro, it is like a welcoming oasis within a hurried metropolis. The festive atmosphere is enhanced on the first Wednesday of the tournament when the grounds are invaded by hundreds of local schoolchildren.

Every Grand Slam crowd is different: the Melbourne Park masses are laid-back and friendly, the Wimbledon brigade will cheer politely even when all the Brits have been knocked out early, while the Flushing Meadows faithful have the raucous edge of a no-nonsense New Yorker.

The French fans are passionate about the players they like – especially the Europeans – but extend Paris' distaste for loud Americans or uncouth behaviour in general.

Who could forget the 1999 women's final when a packed house at the Court Philippe Chatrier turned on a tantrum-throwing Martina Hingis? The Swiss star saw her game fall to pieces, was brought to tears and unexpectedly lost the match to veteran Steffi Graf after holding a 6-4, 2-0 lead.

There is no dress-code, but even the casual fan might feel self-conscious alongside the finely-cut business suits, elegant gowns of the professional people who come directly from the office.

Flamboyant Gustavo Kuerten quickly got on the good side of the Paris crowds when he won the 1997 tournament as the world's 66th ranked player. The Brazilian went on to collect a hat-trick of titles at Roland Garros and in 2001 famously drew hearts in the clay with his racket with his racquet in the clay to show his appreciation of the support.

In Paris, players have a close relationship with the court that isn't seen at the other Grand Slam tournaments: meaningfully pointing to marks where the ball has landed during any dispute over line-calls.

The clay – or la terre battue – is a thin coating of crushed red bricks on eight centimetres of limestone. Compared to grass, carpet or hard-courts, it slows down the speed of the ball, making serving less potent and shot-making more important.

That's why serve-and-volleyers like Sampras, Edberg, Becker and McEnroe never prospered in Paris. Their lack of potency

on clay courts opened the way for others – often Europeans and South Americans – to shine on the big stage, even if they usually floundered on faster surfaces elsewhere.

1995 Champion Thomas Muster rose to the world number one ranking as he won 44 tournaments, but only four came in non-clay events. 2002 Winner Albert Costa never tasted success away from the red stuff as he claimed 12 career titles.

Three-time defending champion Rafael Nadal is threatening to buck the trend after finishing runner-up at Wimbledon soon after lifting the Coupe des Mousquetaires. Over the past two years, he's beaten Roger Federer in the championship match in Paris only to lose to the world number one in the Wimbledon final.

Federer is expected to significantly add to his tally of 12 Grand Slam titles – he's won eight in the last three years – but Roland Garros may continue to elude him, with Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Nikolay Davydenko on the rise.

Ice-cool Bjorn Borg, with six titles, and Chris Evert with seven, have been the most successful players in the Open Era, although Belgium's Justine Henin is this year aiming for her fifth Roland Garros crown – and a stunning fourth in a row.

But Paris perhaps remembers most fondly the one-off wonders – like 1983 champion Yannick Noah, the first French men's singles winner in 37 years and the only one in the

Open Era – and Michael Chang, whose 1989 victory was said to have inspired a new generation of tennis players across Asia.

The American son of Taiwanese immigrants, the diminutive 17-year-old became the youngest men's singles winner when he upset Ivan Lendl, famously serving under-arm when struck down by cramp in the fourth set. The epic final extended Chang's time on court during the tournament to 21 hours and 18 minutes.

Two decades later, little has changed. La Tournoi de Roland Garros remains the most difficult Grand Slam tournament to win – and a stylish one that stands apart from the rest. □

Jason Dasey (www.jasondasey.com) is an international broadcaster and corporate host.