

The United States Davis Cup, What Went Wrong

This year the stage was set for a great United States Triumph in the Davis Cup quarter finals. The U.S. winners of the cup 32 times, would play Spain at home. Able to dictate location, surface, and having a wealth of players to choose from, would certainly give the U.S. the upper hand. The U.S. had a flawless record against the Spaniards at home; the Spaniards had never won on U.S. soil. Andy Roddick successfully lobbied to have the tie played in his hometown of Austin, Texas and U.S. tennis fans cheered, the longtime Davis Cup stalwart would lead his team to victory in front of his home fans. Further cheers were let out when it was announced Nadal would take a pass on the tie to rest after a long clay court season and a runner-up finish at Wimbledon. With this news and the U.S. electing to play the tie on a fast indoor court they were the clear favorites and would surely make it through to the semifinals. Sadly things did not go as planned, the Spaniards left the tie with a 3-1 victory and the United States was left wondering what went wrong.

There are no simple answers to the question of what went wrong but I believe some mistakes were made in selecting the team and surface for the tie. For one thing I believe that John Isner would have been a better choice for a second singles player over Mardy Fish. Secondly I believe the tie should have been contested on a grass court and not the fast surface that was chosen. The Spaniards have a lot of depth when selecting hard court players to challenge the U.S. but lack the same depth on grass courts.

First let's take a closer look at the makeup of the team. Team captain Jim Courier, in only his second tie at the helm, named Mardy Fish and Andy Roddick as his singles players and Mike and Bob Bryan as his doubles players. Courier's choice of the Bryan brothers made sense given their impeccable record in Davis Cup it is Courier's choice of Mardy Fish over John Isner as a singles player I take issue with. Fish has had a career renaissance over the last year propelling him to a career high ranking of number 8 and making him the highest ranked American two spaces above Andy Roddick who is currently ranked number ten. However in spite of his recent accomplishments Fish's Davis Cup singles record going into the weekend was barely over .500 at 6-5, his record post tie is just under .500 at 6-7. This record hardly makes him the strongest choice for the top ranked singles player on the team. The victories that Fish has had in Davis Cup have been hard fought even after his career renaissance. Last fall in the World Group playoffs Fish played two tough five set matches against the Colombians on clay. Fish did not dominate either match; all the sets were close and had to fight for his victory until the last point against players who were ranked well beneath him. Thus it was no surprise when Fish lost both his singles matches this weekend. It seems to me that when you chose your team you want the number one singles player on your team to be a better Davis Cup player than Fish.

John Isner's Davis Cup singles record is worse than Fish's at 1-3, but all these matches were contested on clay arguably Isner's worse surface. Unlike Fish, Isner

has not had good year, his ranking has fallen from a career high 19 last December to a current ranking of 46. Despite all of this I still believe Isner would have been the better the choice for a second singles player over Mardy Fish. The fast indoor surface really suits Isner's serve making returning difficult for the members of the Spanish team, and their specialty is returning. Isner is a veteran of team tennis, playing four year at the University of Georgia and earning All-American honors each season. Isner understands what it means to be part of a team more than Fish, and would have helped boost team moral and Isner knows how to use the crowd to carry him to a win. Finally choosing Isner would have allowed Roddick to remain the top ranked American on the team and the team leader. Roddick thrives when he is team leader and never seemed comfortable in the second place role he was forced to play this weekend. After Fish lost the first match Roddick came out with little energy or belief to play the second match. His attitude appeared to be if Fish, the leading player in the team, lost the first match then what can I do? Had Isner played and lost the first match I believe that Roddick, as the leading player on the team in that scenario, would have come out on fire knowing it was his job to lead the team to victory.

The other big problem with this tie was the surface. The United States selected a fast indoor surface. However when the tie was announced there was speculation that the tie would be played on an indoor grass court specially constructed for the occasion. To me it would have made more sense to play the tie on grass. The Spanish team, who balked at the selection of the indoor surface claiming it was not approved by the ITF, has greater depth on hard courts than they have on grass. Although the Spanish team is better know for their performance on clay all of their major singles players: Lopez, Verdasco, Ferrer, and Nadal have all won titles on hard courts. However with the exception of Ferrer who won the UNICEF Open in 2008 the only Spanish player who excels on grass is Nadal. For the most part the Spaniards exit in the early rounds of grass court tournaments. However, the U.S. squad has had great success on grass. Roddick has been a Wimbledon runner-up three times and won Queen's club three time, Fish has won Newport and been a runner up at Queen's, Isner has won Newport two times, and the Bryan brothers are fresh off their second title at Wimbledon. Unlike the Spaniards the Americans can win on grass, and with the tie scheduled for the weekend after Wimbledon grass would have given the U.S. team an advantage and a sense of confidence they appeared to lack.

Of course analyzing the makeups of teams and surfaces is all academic, what really counts are how the players play. On that score things went from bad to worse very quickly during the weekend. When Fish lost the first match after wasting an early break in the fifth set, the fight seemed to go out of the American team. Roddick lost the second match in straight sets after wasting break leads in the first two sets. The Bryans did their job on the second day by winning the doubles but not before dropping the first set. Sadly Fish could not capitalize on the Bryan brothers win on the final day of the tie; he lost to Ferrer in four sets. It was a deflating lose for Fish, he squandered an opportunity to serve out the first set and wasted several other opportunities in the match. Instead of Roddick closing out the tie, the U.S. was left on

the sidelines as they watched the Spanish team celebrate their first victory on U.S. soil. It was a great disappointment for a team that was heavily favored to win.