

Milos Raonic Redefines big man tennis

Over the weekend I had the chance to watch the new big man in tennis, Milo's Raonic, defend his title at the SAP Open in San Jose, CA. The final pitted the 6'5" up and coming 21 year old Canadian against the 25 year old journeyman from Uzbekistan, Denis Istomin. Istomin's main distinction in this tournament was beating two Americans, Sam Querrey 5-7, 6-3, 7-5 in the first round and a hobbled Andy Roddick 6-2, 6-4 in the quarter finals en-route to his second career final. What most impressed me in this final was the type of big man tennis Raonic played. Big man tennis used to be a game of serve or volley, but Raonic backs up his monster serve with great play from the baseline, is this the new version of big man tennis? If it is, it gives us tennis fans something to look forward to since it is certainly a lot of fun to watch.

There is no question that one of the focal points of Raonic's game is his serve. His motion includes a deep knee bend that helps him generate the power and speed that he puts on the ball. During the final Raonic's serve so over powered Istomin that Raonic only lost a total of four points on it. At one point during the match Raonic hit a serve at 150mph, it zoomed by Istomin so fast that he challenged it, because he had no idea where it landed. Raonic's serve contains such power that even if the opponent is able to return the serve it is never a great return and Raonic is in a great offensive position in the resulting rally and generally wins it. No matter how many times it seemed to me that Istomin was winning the war on court positioning Raonic, would find a way to win the point, by making Istomin hit one more ball. Unlike his idol Pete Sampras, whom he is frequently compared to, Raonic seldom approaches the net and when he does he often loses the point. Raonic's version of big man tennis is a combination of the great players of the past two generations of tennis. Like Sampras Raonic has an amazing serve, and like the greats of this generation, Nadal, Djokovic, and Federer, Raonic is at home on the baseline.

Raonic's game does have some weaknesses. Raonic's net game is almost non-existent. When he comes to net he looks lost, and at his size and power he should be able to defend passing shots better than he can.

The bigger problem with Raonic's game is he lacks the ability to turn offense into defense when his opponent is serving. Raonic finds himself involved in a lot of tie breaks because he seems unable to find a way to string enough points together on his opponents serve to break him. Raonic frequently wins his tiebreaks against players ranked outside the top ten and then his opponents generally becomes so discouraged Raonic is able to win the second set easily. This was true of his semi-final and final in San Jose, after a tight first sets ending in a tie break which Raonic won in both matches, he went on to win the second set easily by a score of 6-2. While this formula works with players outside the top ten, with players inside the top ten, whom Raonic has a 5-8 record against, this formula does not work. Top ten players are better returners than their lower ranked counterparts and are able to break Raonic and the sets seldom go to tie breaks. For example look at his record

against Rafael Nadal, one of the best returners in the game. The two have met twice, both meetings occurred on hard courts which are generally considered Nadal's worst surface. Nadal won both meetings in straight sets by breaking Raonic's serve once in each of the four sets they have played meaning no tiebreaks were necessary. Raonic's inability to create break opportunities means he was unable to get back into the matches by breaking Nadal's serve and as a result he lost the matches.

Raonic's game is certainly evolving, but the foundation for a dominating game is there. Raonic is terrific on his serve, he can serve bombs and win the resulting rallies when his opponent can get the serve back in play. Where he needs work is at the net and his return game. If he can improve that then the big four better beware because Raonic will rocket to the top of the game. Whatever happens it will be great to watch, Raonic is a great player and fun to watch.