

It's not About Revenge, Nadal Wins his Fifth French Open

On May 31, 2009 Rafael Nadal stood on Court Philippe Chatrier, in his neon pink shirt not victorious. This was new for him, Nadal had won all of his previous 31 matches at Roland Garros and all of his 48 best of five matches on clay, but on this day none of that mattered, Nadal had lost. The victor was the 23 seed Robin Soderling and the final score was 6-2, 6-7, 6-4, 7-6. So how had this happened, how had this journeyman player ranked 25th in the world done what many had previous considered impossible? Yes it was true that Nadal had not played his best, his balls did not have their usual depth and his passing shots did not have their usual effectiveness, but Nadal had frequently won when played like this, so why was this day different? The difference was Soderling. His willingness to take Nadal's ball early, his willingness to dictate played combined with his powerful forehand and serve had knocked the king off his throne. This meant that a week from that Sunday Nadal would not hoist the 'Coupe des Mousquetaires' for the fifth consecutive time, oh well there was always next year. As for Soderling he backed up his upset by making it to the final of the French Open and finishing the year with a career high ranking of 8.

On June 1, 2010 a year and a day after he upset Nadal, Robin Soderling once again stood the victor of another big upset at Roland Garros. For the second year in a row Soderling had taken down the world number one and defending champion. This year the victim was not Nadal, but Federer. Soderling had beaten him the same way he had beaten Nadal, by taking the ball early and hitting through the court. Although Soderling had destroyed many fans hope of a dream final between Federer and Nadal, he created an equally appealing prospect. Nadal had the possibility of getting revenge against Soderling, in the finals should they both make it there. When that did happen Nadal insisted the final would not be about revenge, he just wanted to play his best and win.

Going into the final Nadal was favorite. He had the best clay court season of his career. He had won all three clay court masters series titles in Monte Carlo, Rome, and Madrid. He had dropped only two sets, one to Gulbis in Rome and one to Almagro in Madrid. He had not dropped a set at Roland Garros during the tournament, his confidence was brimming and not only did he have the chance to capture his seventh Grand Slam trophy, if he won the title he would also take back the number one ranking from Roger Federer. Soderling's clay court season had been more inconsistent, he had withdrawn from Monte Carlo, lost in the final of Barcelona to Verdasco and exited early from Rome and Madrid. However at the French he had played well and followed up his win over Federer with a five set victory over Berdych. Whatever the outcome of the final Soderling seemed ready to give Nadal a tough match.

As the players entered the court for the final on June 6, 2010 both were interviewed by reporters. Nadal once again reiterated that this match was not about revenge but playing his best. Meanwhile Soderling appeared more relaxed than he had the previous year at the final. Both players were ready to get out on the court and play their best tennis.

Although Nadal controlled the rallies from the start Soderling managed to stay with him in the early stages. Then Nadal broke Soderling to go up 3-2 in the first set and never lost the lead. He held break points in Soderling's next service game that would have allowed him to win the set 6-2 but he failed to

convert them. It did not matter, Nadal still won the set 6-4. This was not the Nadal Soderling had upset in 2009. This was a Nadal who was moving well, his shots had their usual depth and painted the lines for winners instead of just missing as they had the previous year. Gone was the discouraged look that seemed to be present when he played Soderling in 2009, in its place was Nadal's usual fist pumps and celebrating when he won a big point.

In spite of all of this Soderling did not give up. In Nadals' first serve game of the second set Soderling held four break points. Nadal saved the first with an ace. He saved the second when Soderling sent a backhand long to lose a 10 stroke rally. The third was a masterpiece the type that delights fans. Soderling's backhand return was so good that his fans cheered, surely it was a winner. However Nadal reached the ball crouched down and chopped the ball back. This began an 11-stroke point, in which Nadal blocked a Soderling overhead smash, and finished the point by moving to the net and caressed a drop volley winner. Nadal saved the fourth break point when Soderling made three consecutive return errors. Missing all four opportunities meant instead of Soderling leading 2-0 the score was tied at 1-1. Soderling would hold his serve the next game but it would be the last game he would win for 7 games.

After not capitalizing on any of the seven break points he had in the match to that point Soderling seemed to lose heart. Instead of taking Nadal's ball early and going for winners as he had the previous year Soderling stood at the baseline and tried to out rally Nadal. Nadal saw that is what he was doing and moved Soderling around the court and was able to win the majority of the points. When Soderling did win a point he looked relieved, almost as if he felt he was lucky to win the point. This showed a lack of confidence in his ability to win, and without this confidence he did not stand a chance.

Once Nadal won the second set 6-2 and lead 2-0 in the final set it pretty much settled things for good. Soderling would hold one more break point in the third set but he failed to convert it. Nadal would win the match after a truly dominate performance and a final score of 6-4, 6-2, 6-4. Nadal celebrated with his usual triumphant collapse on the court, and crying into a towel as he awaited the awards ceremony.

Once again Nadal could take his signature bite out of the 'Coupe des Mousquetaires' and stand triumphant. During the awards ceremony Nadal congratulated Soderling and said he had to play one the best clay court matches of his career to beat him, he did not mention revenge. However, by playing one of the best clay court matches of his career Nadal had recaptured his throne and in the process silenced the man who had knocked it from him the previous year. Whether or not this win was about revenge for Nadal it was clear to everyone he has gotten it.