

Welcome to the Summer Hard courts, a Preview of the Atlanta Tennis Championships

This week is a week that every tennis fan looks forward to, the start of the U.S. Olympus Series. True the highlights of this series are the two master series and the U.S. Open which don't take place until August. However, the smaller early tournaments in the series are a treat for American fans; since many of the higher ranked European players do not want to travel to the U.S. until August, the early tournaments in the series feature a good crop of American players including the players who are not ranked high enough to receive direct entry into the bigger tournaments. The first tournament in this series is the Atlanta Tennis Championships which starts on Monday, July 18th. In a field of 32 players nine are American, including last year's champion Mardy Fish, and runner up John Isner. Who will win this year remains to be seen, but here are my predictions based on the draw.

FIRST QUARTER:

This part of the draw is headlined by last year's champion Mardy Fish. Fish should have an easy time here. One of his toughest is a potential second round clash with big serving Frenchman Nicolas Mahut. However Mahut has not had a great year and Mardy poses a big serve as well and is a better returner than Mahut so he should survive this encounter. Another potential tough match for Fish is a potential quarter final clash with Indian Somdev Devvarman. In the early part of this year Devvarman showed he had the skills to play on a hard court. His returning bothered players like Nadal; he has an ability to hit a variety of shots not allowing his opponent to develop much of a rhythm. He did not do well in the clay court season but now that he is returning to the hard courts we will get to see if his skills on hard courts are for real or if he just had a good early season. I believe Devvarman could upset Fish, however I will have to go with Fish and pick him as my semifinalist.

Semifinalist: Mardy Fish

SECOND QUARTER:

This is the weakest quarter with Belgium player Xavier Malisse as the highest seeded player in this section. I do not have that much confidence in Malisse, he is an erratic player who has had some big wins in his career, but injuries and a lack of confidence have translated to an underwhelming resume. I do not believe he will make it through this section. The player I think will come through here is Australian veteran, Lleyton Hewitt. Hewitt's problems in recent years have steamed from injuries but he is healthier at the moment and knows these smaller tournaments give him an opportunity to shine. Look for Lleyton to take advantage of a weak quarter here and shine by making it through to the semifinals.

Semifinalist: Lleyton Hewitt

THIRD QUARTER:

This quarter is headlined by last year's runner up John Isner. Isner is coming in on a high having won his second Newport title a couple of weeks ago. I expect Isner to build on this win and perform well here and throughout the hard court season. Also in the section is American veteran and crowd favorite

James Blake. Blake faces a first round clash with erratic Latvian Ernest Gulbis. If the underperforming Gulbis shows up Blake could beat him, however if Gulbis plays well and wins he could present Isner with a tough second round match. Isner's big serve will trouble Gulbis and when Gulbis is troubled he gives up mentality and loses the match. In other words Isner should win and be the semifinalist from this section.

Semifinalist: John Isner

FOURTH QUARTER:

This section is headlined by Isner's college rival big serving South African Kevin Anderson who is seeded number two. The only problem Anderson could face in this section is a potential quarter final clash with Russian born American Alex Bogomolov Jr. Bogomolov has a bit of a breakout season defeating Andy Murray in Miami and making it to the third round of Wimbledon. Bogomolov plays with a lot of heart, but does not have the strongest game and with Anderson's superior serve I believe he will win the match.

Semifinalist: Kevin Anderson

SEMIFINALS: Hewitt d. Fish, Isner d. Anderson

FINALS: Isner d. Hewitt

Yes this is a small tournament but sometimes the smaller tournaments produce the greatest matches. Besides which what tennis fan doesn't look forward to the start of the summer hard courts because it means the U.S. Open is just around the corner.