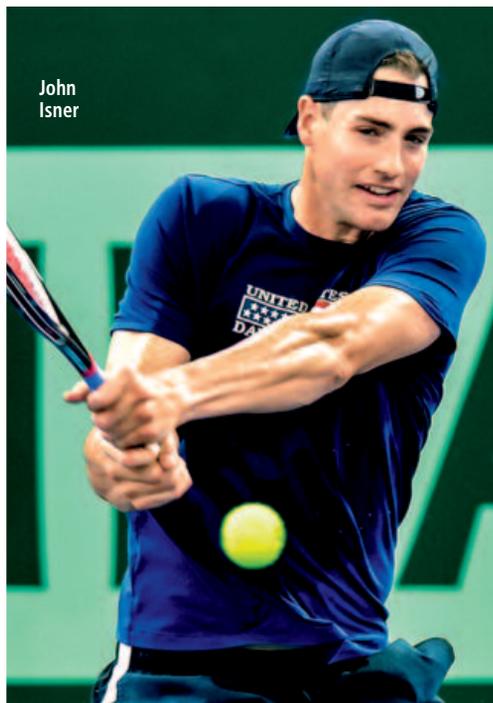




Madison
Keys

Benji Howard/Getty Images



John
Isner

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Double Trouble

U.S. teams have a chance to turn back the clock to Davis Cup's and Fed Cup's glory days.

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

America was a different country in 1995. Nationwide, a gallon of gas cost a hair more than a dollar, Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" dominated the charts, and American tennis was on a tear. That was the year the U.S. Davis Cup and Fed Cup teams advanced to the final rounds of their respective competitions. And this could be the year history repeats itself.

Already, the defending champion U.S. Fed Cup squad has booked a Nov. 10-11 date in the final against third-ranked Czech Republic after besting France on its home turf, 3-2, in April. A few weeks earlier, the sixth-ranked U.S. Davis Cup team set up a Sept. 14-16 semifinal showdown at fourth-ranked Croatia. With victory there, U.S. tennis can go back to the future.

The magic began in the Davis Cup first round in February, when the United States clinched with a 3-nil score against Serbia. And then the U.S. men did it again against 2017 Davis Cup runner-up Belgium, sweeping 4-0. The last time Team USA dominated the first two Davis Cup rounds like this, in 2007, it won the whole enchilada.

Indeed, getting back to the semifinals has been a decade-long process for the United States, the winningest Davis Cup nation with 32 titles. Advancing further won't be easy, but at least the team won't lack for supportive Fed Cup compatriots. "I love the guys," says Fed Cup captain Kathy Rinaldi. "They're an incredible group of young men. We're always cheering for them. I told [Davis Cup captain] Jim Courier we've gotta go for double titles. It would really be something if we could win both in the same year."

Through 55 years of Davis Cup and Fed Cup participation, the Yanks have claimed same-year titles a whopping seven times, the last in that run coming in 1990. They looked poised to add an eighth year to their global rule in 1995, the last time both U.S. teams reached their respective finals, pending the Davis Cup semifinals in a few weeks.

In '95, the U.S. women traveled to Spain for the Fed Cup final on red clay in Valencia, having whipped Austria and France to open their campaign. The American men, after breezing past France, Italy and Sweden, were poised for a clash with Russia on red clay in Moscow for the Davis Cup final.

Mere days before the Fed Cup title tilt, world No. 1 Monica Seles withdrew from the U.S. roster with knee and ankle injuries—a development that forced then-captain Billie Jean King to turn to future captain Mary Joe Fernandez to carry the load. Alas, she and the ascendant Chanda Rubin were no match for the double whammy of Conchita Martinez and Arantxa Sanchez Vicario. The Grand Slam champion Spaniards propelled their side to victory in the first three rubbers.

At the time, Rinaldi, a former Top 10 player in her own right, was nearing the end of her career. But as the current Fed Cup captain she can appreciate the opportunity that was lost in Spain. The United States rebounded by claiming Fed Cup championships in '96, '99 and 2000, but it didn't win title No. 18 until last year—ending an agonizing 17-year drought. "There's a great history of tennis in the U.S.," Rinaldi says. "Obviously when I started, we had so many great American players. And I know things go in cycles and maybe we didn't have as many players as we had been spoiled with from before."

To her point: The '95 Davis Cup team was an embarrassment of riches. It featured not only Courier, a four-time Grand Slam tournament champion, but also Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras—who, at the time, were in a bare-knuckle fight for the No. 1 ranking. On paper, they could not have been a bigger favorite. But psychologically they were splintering. How could they not, after learning that Tim Gullikson, the ebullient player turned coach, had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor? The news wasn't just devastating to Tom Gullikson, Tim's twin brother, former doubles partner and (then) U.S. Davis Cup captain; it absolutely floored Sampras, whom Tim had coached to four major championship titles and the top of the rankings.

The enormity of that unavoidable loss would crack Sampras's stoic on-court bearing on more than a few occasions that year. Heading into the Davis Cup final against Russia, no one knew if he was up for the job.

But Sampras didn't just get himself together; he got all three of Team USA's wins—not least a doubles rubber while paired with Todd Martin—to register a three-Pete. “Pete came off the court [after the first rubber] in cramps from fatigue,” Courier recalls. “That he could win two more points for us was amazing. Pete had a toughness that he didn't talk about, but it revealed itself plenty of times in his career. This was one of those times.”

You could say the players on both American rosters this year are built in the Sampras mold, which is to say they have big serves, bigger forehands and bellicose spirits. On the men's side, John Isner was a 22-year-old tour newbie when he was called up to serve as a practice partner for the '07 U.S. Davis Cup team that won it all. Now, he's the man, with 28 ties under his belt, 17 of them “W”s. “He has had huge wins for our team, and the guys look to him for leadership during team weeks,” Courier says. “As a college tennis player [at Georgia], he gets the team atmosphere, and it would be appropriate for him to lift the trophy for the USA, given how important he has been for the team for so many years.”

Sam Querrey, another seasoned Davis Cup hand, with 19 ties (10 of them triumphs), helps set the tone. Ryan Harrison and Steve Johnson, as effective in doubles as in singles play, add versatility. Jack Sock is at home on the big stage, a fact he proved yet again while teaming with Harrison in the doubles clincher against Belgium in April. The flexibility of an additional roster spot is a new Davis Cup wrinkle that has not gone unappreciated.

Still, for as well as the Americans have played, they caught breaks against Serbia (minus Novak Djokovic) and Belgium (missing David Goffin). Against Croatia, they'll likely have to contend with Marin Cilic, Borna Coric and Ivan Dodig, who are a combined 6-1 in singles and doubles play this season. Looming on the other side of the draw are either the French or the Spanish, who have heavy hitters of their own.

As for the U.S. women, they may have their hands full with a Czech team that has been rolling behind a revitalized Petra Kvitova. But the Americans' depth should see them through. While CoCo Vandeweghe's level has tapered some since she pulled a Pete and carried the States to last year's Fed Cup title, defending US Open champion Sloane Stephens has stepped up in just the way Rinaldi thought she might after suffering consecutive three-set losses in last year's final against Belarus. “I know how disappointed she was,” Rinaldi says of Stephens, who won both of her matches against France in April. “That's why I had no doubt that she would come back and be in a different position and clinch it for us. She played so beautifully in France.”

So did '17 Open runner-up Madison Keys, who adds to the Americans' roster flexibility. The return of Bethanie Mattek-Sands, who's rounding back into form after suffering that gruesome knee injury last year at Wimbledon, is another boon. And then of course Rinaldi can call on the Williams sisters, too. Any combination of those six players would make for an awesome quartet, one stronger than the group that won it all last year. Rinaldi, who is undefeated since taking over as Fed Cup captain in December 2016, couldn't be better positioned to hold up her end of the United States's double-title bargain. “We certainly want to join the Fed Cup team in the finals of this year's competition,” Courier says. “Kathy and I have been talking about it all year.”

Now seems like the perfect time to turn back the clock. ●

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