

US OPEN REPORT  
September 4, 2006  
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After my long day and night at the Open on August 31, Labor Day — September 4 — was nearly a cameo appearance. My ticket was for the night session, and the organizers did not open the gates to night attendees until 6:00 p.m. Because I was not planning to be at the Open for hours upon hours, I was able to travel light. By not bringing a bag, I must have saved at least 15 minutes on the security line. A security guard told one woman on the no-bag line that she would be stopped at the entrance because she was carrying a tiny change purse. Adapting quickly, she emptied the contents into her pocket and tossed the purse — which, I am rather confident, was too small to harbor weapons of mass destruction — into a trash bin.

After the gates were opened, there were announcements that Armstrong and the Grandstand were full and, in any event, off limits to night ticket-holders. The paucity of seats probably had a lot to do with two leading ladies, thirty years apart in age, Maria Sharapova (who was to defeat Na Li on Armstrong) and Martina Navratilova (who was to advance in mixed doubles with Bob Bryan against the team of Tiantian Sun and Julian Knowle).

For me, it was to be an evening of French stylists, two triumphant and one valiant in defeat.

#### **COURT 10**

**Fabrice Santoro (France)/Nenad Zimonjic (Serbia) v. Olivier Rochus/Kristof Vliegen (Belgium)**

Though you wouldn't know it to read the headlines, both members of the Belgian team had been seeded in the singles draw. Kristof Vliegen ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ms/atpv309.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpv309.html)) had fallen in the first round to the Polish qualifier Lukasz Kubot, while Olivier Rochus ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ms/atpr397.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpr397.html)) had lost earlier on

Monday to his sometime pigeon Marat Safin. With that win, Safin had improved to 6-4 over Rochus, perhaps not the record he'd hope for against a fellow generously listed at 5'5". Remarkably,



**Santoro.**

notwithstanding Safin's aversion to grass, Rochus is 2-1 against Safin on the turf. While Rochus often smiles and seems bemused to have an athletic career, Vliegen appears to be a bundle of nervous energy, on his toes with calf muscles tensed when Rochus serves, nervously pumping his right leg during changeovers.

Facing the Belgians were the fifth-seeded team, Fabrice Santoro ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ms/atps424.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atps424.html)), closing in on his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Nenad Zimonjic ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ms/atpz072.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpz072.html)), a mere lad of 30. It occurred to me that it would be an interesting match if the diminutive Rochus and Santoro faced the imposing Zimonjic and Vliegen, each of whom is listed as 6'4". It is good, however, to see the wizardry of the smaller players paired with the power of the bigger ones. It is not for nothing that Santoro is called the Magician. We've seen other players — Monica Seles, Jan-Michael Gambill, Gene Mayer — hit with two hands off both wings, but who has Santoro's array of spins, dinks, feints, and tweaks? His two Australian Open doubles titles and French Open mixed title are no accident. Two of the other players own Grand

Slam doubles titles: Zimonjic won the mixed in Melbourne and Roland Garros, while Rochus, for his part, claimed the 2004 French Open with Xavier Malisse.



**Zimonjic.**

I arrived late in the second set and scored a seat behind the court. The fifth seeds had procured the first set in a tiebreak, but Santoro, serving at 3-4, was now broken. Vliegen could not serve out the set, so the teams were on serve when Zimonjic toed the line at 4-5. At 30-30, Santoro poached and missed his forehand volley. (As is typical for an all-two-handed player, Santoro hits his forehands cross-handed.) Zimonjic then missed a backhand volley for the set. Frustrated, he took the second ball from his pocket and launched it in the general direction of the Unisphere behind Court 10.



**Vliegen.**



**Rochus.**

The third set stayed on serve till the climactic tiebreak. Santoro and Zimonjic pocketed two mini-breaks for a 4-1 lead with winners from Zimonjic on return of serve and a poach. Vliegen recovered one mini-break by drilling a forehand between his opponents and the second when Santoro double faulted. With the tiebreak level again, Zimonjic reached match point with an ace at 5-5, out wide to Vliegen's forehand. Vliegen climbed out of danger at 5-6 by concluding a long rally with a backhand volley winner. On his second service point, however, Vliegen missed a forehand volley. Santoro, serving for the match, elicited a floating return from Rochus, and Zimonjic buried the ensuing overhead for a well-earned 7-6(2) 4-6 7-6(6) victory.

### **Arthur Ashe Stadium**

#### **Amelie Mauresmo (France) v. Serena Williams (US)**

One doesn't think of a match between Amelie Mauresmo ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ws/wtam450.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtam450.html)) and Serena Williams ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ws/wtaw234.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtaw234.html)) as featuring a top seed against



**Mauresmo.**

a wild card. With Williams largely inactive of late as a result of injuries and bereavement, and Mauresmo having finally climbed the Grand Slam mountain in Australia and France, these were two players going in different directions, but the outcome was far from a foregone conclusion. For one thing, Williams has a good record against Mauresmo. For another, the Frenchwoman has not been dominant in this tournament.

While the first French stylist of the evening hit every stroke with two hands, Mauresmo unleashes her backhand with one powerful right arm. The contest was three matches in one. When I arrived, Mauresmo broke to snare the first set, 6-4. Williams promptly broke back and did it again and again to bagel Mauresmo in the second set. Mauresmo seemed to be either adrift or conserving her energy in the second, but she came out fighting in the third. When Williams served at 2-3, Mauresmo sprinted out to a 15-40 lead and was able to convert the second of the break points. Williams seemed to lose some zip on her strokes (could it be fa-



**Williams.**

tigue? nerves?), and fell behind match point on her serve at 2-5. Whether from desperation or resignation, Williams tried a drop shot, which Mauresmo ran down, ending the match two shots later with an angled drop volley that secured her victory by the odd score of 6-4 0-6 6-2.

Clearly, Mauresmo has turned her career around, or at least kicked it into a higher gear. The mystery is Serena Williams. At 25, is she on her last legs, or will she once again ascend the heights? The difficulty of answering such questions with confidence is a big part of what makes sports interesting. It is also a reminder that nothing is forever. The dominance of the Williams sisters evaporated suddenly, and players as different as Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe, and Mats Wilander were finished winning major titles by age 25. We cannot assume that Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal will keep piling up the silverware.

**Arthur Ashe Stadium**  
**Lleyton Hewitt (Australia) v. Richard Gasquet (France)**

The last French stylist of the evening was Richard Gasquet ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ms/atpg628.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpg628.html)), a great hope for his nation since before his teens, now trying to climb the rankings again at 20 after injuries pushed him back. His opponent, Lleyton Hewitt ([www.usopen.org/en\\_US/bios/ms/atph432.html](http://www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atph432.html)), has been on the tour forever but will not be 26 till February. It seems that his days in the winner's circle at major championships ended with his Wimbledon crown in 2002, as he was superseded first by Andy Roddick and later more decisively by Federer and Nadal, but he still does not give away easy points.

The players both featured backward baseball caps, but their styles differ. Gasquet has perhaps the best-looking one-handed backhand in the sport and does everything with flair. Hewitt grinds away. No one speaks of "Hewitt Moments" — he does not hit shots that make one wonder how he conceived the possibility — but he runs everything down and does not miss easily. Needless to say, part of the Hewitt aura is his ornery demeanor, which makes him less than a fan favorite, except among the green-and-yellow-clad contingent shouting: "Aussie! Aussie! Aussie! Oi! Oi! Oi!"

I had noted when Gasquet had played Gilles Simon that he unleashes his serve as the match goes on, rising from the 110-115 mph range to 125-130. This never happened when Gasquet played Hewitt. His hardest serve on the night came in at 125, and his average first serve was only 110. Instead, he maintained a first serve rate of 67%, presumably concerned not to give Hewitt too many looks at second serves.

The first set was a festival of service



**Gasquet.**

breaks, four of them in a row, until Hewitt picked up a fifth at 4-4 and served out the set. In the second set, the players exchanged breaks in the first two games and then Gasquet fell behind 0-40 in the ninth game. He climbed out of danger to deuce, only to be broken when Hewitt conjured up a backhand lob for a winner, followed by a cross-court forehand volley that found open court.

Having burned the midnight oil (and beyond) with Andre Agassi and Marcos Baghdatis the other evening, I decided at that point to do the mature thing that someone with a day job would do: I returned home. Imagine my surprise when I turned on the television and saw the players in a fifth set, with Gasquet cramping (another theme of late nights at the Open) and, on one of Hewitt's match points, hitting an impossible forehand passing shot from way off the court, which can be seen at [eurosport.com/tennis/u-s-](http://eurosport.com/tennis/u-s-)

[open/2006/mc\\_vid29057.shtml](http://open/2006/mc_vid29057.shtml). But Gasquet was out of gas, and Hewitt cashed in his third match point for a 6-4 6-4 4-6 3-6 6-3 win.

I wonder whether the next big step for Gasquet will be to control the court better. He is often way behind the baseline, as though on clay, and is known to throw in inadvisable drop shots. Meanwhile, Hewitt crowded the baseline and deprived Gasquet of oxygen. I look for Gasquet to improve on this aspect of his game if he is to climb into the Top Ten. And I look forward to one more visit to the Open, hoping that my good luck with the weather will continue.



**Hewitt.**