

LESSONS FROM MATS' MOVE TO NO. 1

BY TONY TRABERT, Instruction Editor, with Mark Preston



Mats Wilander surprised many people when

he knocked off Ivan Lendl in the final of this year's U.S. Open, a tournament Lendl had won the previous three years. With that victory, Wilander took over the top spot in men's tennis. I would be surprised if he didn't hold on to the No. 1 ranking for some time to come.

The reason is simple: Wilander has evolved into a complete player, someone who must now be considered a favorite to win on any surface. He first served notice of his talent in 1982 when he won the French Open at age 17. Back then, his game was relatively one dimensional: counter-punching from the baseline. Although it enabled him to win his first Grand Slam title, Wilander realized that his style would not win him many big titles on other surfaces, and he vowed then to work on his game. He's done exactly that and he's still improving. That was especially apparent during this year's Open final.

One of the key lessons from Wilander's Open win is the importance of **having a game plan**. After losing a four-set match to Lendl in the 1987 U.S. Open final, Wilander knew that sticking to what he does most naturally—serving and staying back to rally from the baseline—wouldn't be enough. Instead, Wilander decided from the beginning that he'd mix it up more, playing steady and consistent tennis but attacking whenever he had the chance. He knows that a good game plan is not only built around your strengths, but around what it

takes to diffuse the strengths of your opponent. That's why it's important to be a well-rounded player, so you give yourself more options.

Wilander has developed a solid **one-handed slice backhand as an alternative to his two-handed topspin shot**. The slice enables him to conserve energy when rallying from the baseline. He needed all of that energy during the almost five-hour Open final. Additionally, Wilander has learned to attack the net effectively. Statistics provided by CompuTennis show that Wilander went to the net 119 times out of a total of 327 points in this year's final, winning 59 percent of those points. Compare that to the 1987 final, when he ventured to the net only 71 times.

Wilander isn't a great volleyer. He's a competent volleyer, but he hits good approach shots. It is possible to win at the net even if you're not a great volleyer. More than half the battle is getting there. **The approach shot is the most important ingredient in successful net play**. Wilander hit a variety of solid approaches, putting Lendl in a defensive situation many times. They helped make Wilander's volleys that much more effective.

Some people say you should only approach down the line, but I don't agree and Wilander proved that. **Approach any way possible, depending on your position, your opponent's position and your respective strengths**. Wilander wanted to avoid Lendl's forehand, so he often hit his backhand approach cross-court to Lendl's backhand.

Wilander got passed on occasion, but he was **playing the per-**

centages. If he gets passed four times and puts away six (which his 59 percent winning ratio at the net indicates), he's got a winning plan.

Another winning factor for Wilander was his first-serve percentage—an impressive 87 percent, with no double faults over nearly five hours. Lendl's 43 percent shows that he was going for more aces or outright winners with his first serve. Wilander's aim was simply to prevent Lendl from getting a chance to take a swing at his second serve. **Mixing up the first serve, changing speeds and placing it well will create more problems for your opponent than trying to hit every one at 100 percent velocity**. Lendl served nine aces, Wilander had two. That's just not enough of an advantage to warrant Lendl's serving that hard and making that low a percentage.

Lendl was never absolutely sure what Wilander was going to do. Whereas the Wilander of the 1987 final would play conservatively when facing break point on his own serve, this year he often served and volleyed effectively. **Ideally, you always want to keep your opponent uncomfortable**. Every time you stand in a slightly different position, every time you hit something he doesn't expect, you have given your opponent something else to think about and that can work in your favor.

Wilander won the U.S. Open and took over No. 1 by adding to an already excellent game. No matter how complete you think your game is now, you can build on it, add to it and make yourself a more complete and better player. ●