

Wilander builds a new empire

JOHN ROBERTS reports from Flushing Meadow

AT THE beginning of his triumphant year, Mats Wilander made a joke. If a Swedish player and a Czechoslovak player jumped off the Empire State Building, who would land first? Answer: "Who cares!"

The inclination to yawn at the prospect of a match between Wilander and Ivan Lendl is no longer so strong. Thanks to Wilander's persistence, the balance of power has finally swung. Lendl's three-year reign as the world No. 1 is over, at least for the moment.

Their latest contest in the final of the United States Open here on Sunday night was not at all like leaping off the Empire State, which tends to produce a quick result. Although a tournament of surprises still produced a final between the expected players, there was not a shred of indifference as the match built to a magnificent climax. The problem was the match was scheduled so late that half the crowd had gone home to bed.

For spectators, matches between these two tend to be long, drawn-out coffee-and-hamper affairs, akin to watching American football live. Two players who start a best-of-five-sets duel on a pacy cement court by exchanging 24 and 34-shot rallies and are still out there nearly five hours later have to be admired for patience and endurance.

Wilander had to sustain his effort for four hours 54 minutes, seven minutes longer than the record he and Lendl claimed over

four sets on the same court a year ago. He edged the match 6-4, 4-6, 6-3, 5-7, 6-4, by having the courage to make frequent charges from the baseline against a rival who was signalling signs of vulnerability.

Although the year of the Swedes will not be complete until Wilander has challenged Lendl again at the Nabisco Masters and the nation has defended the Davis Cup against West Germany, their domination of the men's game has been emphatic. Wilander has won three of the four Grand Slam titles — the Australian, French and United States championships — stumbling only against the Czechoslovak Miloslav Mecir at Wimbledon. On that occasion, Stefan Edberg raised the Swedish banner.

Ever since the Bjorn Borg era came to an abrupt end in 1981, his young heirs have won many titles and made several fortunes, but only now have they emerged from the phenomenon's shadow. Edberg proved that Borg was not the only Swede who could flourish at Wimbledon, and Wilander has become the first to win the US Open. Borg failed in four finals.

Yesterday, the 24-year-old Wilander emulated Borg by becoming the second Swede to be ranked No. 1 on the grand prix computer. His success left Lendl three weeks short of Jimmy

Connors's record run of 159 consecutive weeks at No. 1.

Asked how long he thought his reign would last, the Swede said: "As long as my wife allows me to play tennis, I hope." The response was not as light-hearted as it may seem. Wilander has a keen sense of priority, as he proved by taking a break from the circuit two years ago and marrying Sonya Mulholland, a South African.

Wilander had grown weary of the routine of travelling from continent to continent and found himself losing concentration in matches. He returned to the tour refreshed, prepared, he said, to stay on court and bore everybody if that is what it took to win titles.

In common with Lendl, Wilander works on the principle that if you do well in the four Grand Slam events the computer will take care of itself. Significantly, the Swede has now won seven Grand Slam titles — adding the United States to three Australian and three French — which is one more than Lendl, with whom he shares the frustration of missing out at Wimbledon.

They live a few miles apart in Greenwich, Connecticut, where Lendl is now seeded No. 2.

■ Wilander is doubtful for the Olympics. He said: "I've been having a little problem with my leg, and I'll see how it feels in a few days."