

Wilander Goes Where Angels Fear to Tread

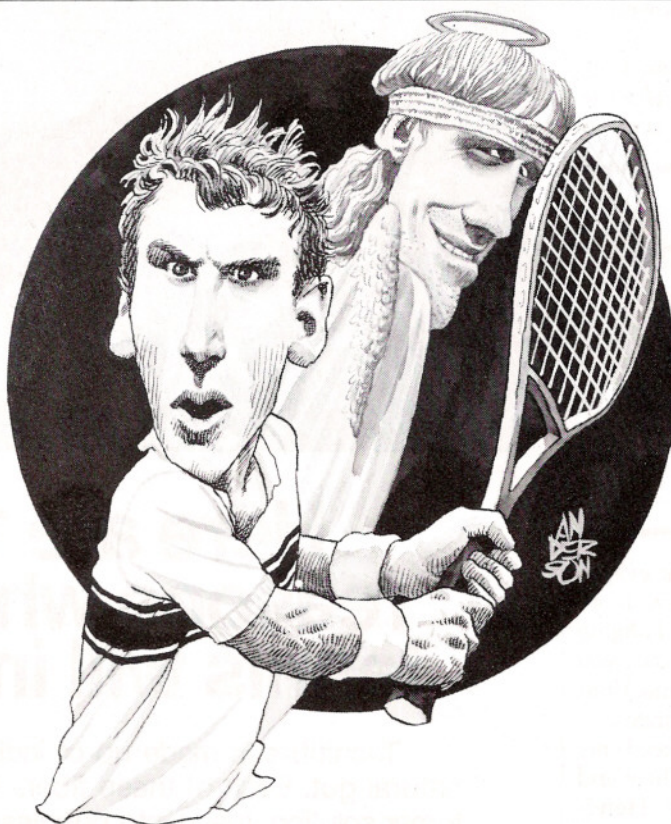
That Mats Wilander won his first of what will surely be many Grand Slam titles—the 1982 French Open—on the day that a secluded Bjorn Borg turned 26 was perhaps no accident. Borg was gone, leaving tournament competition at too young an age, but his style was and is being carried on in the person of Wilander.

To be sure, a large number of tennis fans have never felt the same about the sport since Borg left the major tournament scene following his loss to John McEnroe in the final of the 1981 U.S. Open. To this group of observers, the five-time Wimbledon and six-time French Open champion is irreplaceable.

But Borg's departure would have been much more substantial had it not been for the fortuitous arrival of Wilander in the upper levels of the sport. Some champions dazzle us with their talent but lose much of their luster through self-indulgent, sometimes crude, behavior. Mats Wilander will have none of that.

Many in the game view him as a champion who will carry on a tradition of conduct passed on by the likes of Jack Kramer and Don Budge, Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall, Stan Smith and Arthur Ashe, and, of course, Borg. Each generation needs a model of sportsmanship, and nowadays Ivan Lendl comes closest to filling the bill. Although he has not been able to translate good court manners into crowd affection the way Borg did, Ivan is a "no nonsense" kind of player and, more importantly, a gentleman.

Like Bjorn, Wilander has attained



the highest level of sportsmanship, and is able to respond with "grace under pressure." Three incidents in Mats's short career stand out as shining examples: It is 1982, and Wilander is matched against Jose Luis Clerc in the semifinals of the French Open. The Swede moves in front two sets to one, leading 6-5 in the fourth, match point. Clerc runs around his backhand and stings a forehand reverse crosscourt, which appears to land wide of the sideline. The linesman calls the ball out, and umpire Jacques Dorfmann announces, "Game, set, match, Wilander. . . ." But Mats confronts Dorfmann once he has climbed down from his chair, informing the umpire that the shot was good. A moment later, Dorfmann tells the audience that the match will continue because Wilander has asked for the point to be replayed. Everyone, including Clerc, is aston-

ished. They play the point over, and this time when Clerc errs, there is no doubt: Wilander has won the crowd and the match 7-5, 6-2, 1-6, 7-5.

Two months later, Sweden meets the United States in a Davis Cup quarterfinal in St. Louis. In the fifth and decisive match of the team contest, Wilander makes an awesome comeback after trailing two sets to love and 1-4 in the third against John McEnroe. He wins the third set 19-17, takes the fourth 6-3, and is locked at 6-6 in the fifth. McEnroe's behavior is so abrasive that rumors have circulated on press row that the officials are considering walking off the court.

In this critical thirteenth game of the final set, Wilander directs a crosscourt forehand passing shot arguably close to the sideline. The score is deuce, and if this ball lands in, Mats Wilander will have a break point that could seal an upset victory for Sweden. The linesman signals wide; Swedish captain Hans Olsson protests, but to no avail. The call stands.

Wilander does no more than stare briefly at the official. He plays on, loses the next point, the game, and finally the match. At the press conference Mats offers no excuses for his narrow defeat.

We move on to the Masters this past January, where Wilander met McEnroe again. Circumstances have changed dramatically. The Swede enters this contest with a three-match winning streak against McEnroe, his rival for the No. 1 world ranking. Having conquered the New Yorker on clay at the French Open, cement in Cin-

cinnati, and grass at the Australian Open, Wilander will be rewarded with the No. 1 spot for 1983 by WORLD TENNIS and others if he wins this big one at Madison Square Garden.

McEnroe confronts his challenge and plays a sparkling first set, which he wins 6-2. Now Wilander asserts himself and breaks for a 2-0 second-set lead. After holding a game point for 3-0, he is stricken with a bloody nose.

Quite simply, Mats refuses to rationalize losses, and in that sense the image of Borg again comes into focus.

He stuffs his nostrils with cotton, builds another lead of 4-1, but cannot win another game. McEnroe triumphs 6-2, 6-4, but afterward Wilander quietly gives McEnroe high marks for his performance and refuses to dwell on his own discomfort.

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The similarity is more than one of attitude; it extends to stroke production. True, Borg's forehand was a better shot, less likely to crack under pressure. Bjorn could counterattack off that forehand with greater frequency and more variation. But examining their respective two-handed backhands, there is little to choose between the two. Both produce devastatingly precise passing shots off that wing, with the elder Swede a master of the crosscourt and the younger man a genius with the down-the-line.

But Wilander is the most flexible of the two-handed players: he can make the one-handed block return of serve and the one-handed slice at full stretch look as routine as his topspin two-handed drives.

Borg was the superior server; in fact, from 1976 on, he had one of the pre-

mier first serves in the game, a powerful and deceptive weapon without which he couldn't have become a champion on anything but clay. Wilander shows signs of being able to flash the occasional ace, and has already produced a more forceful and accurate delivery. Still, it is hard to imagine him reaching Borg's high standards in that department.

On the other hand, Wilander already shows a greater mastery of the volley than Borg did. Mats's forehand volley is a more natural punch delivered with more bite. And although Borg improved his backhand volley immensely over the latter stages of his career, Wilander is more versatile and aggressive.

Wilander has a demonstrable capacity for growth and subtlety in his game; in 1983 alone, he made significant strides. Yet whether this translates into a record like his illustrious countryman is highly unlikely. He owns one French and one Australian Open title at the moment, but the record will always show that Borg won five consecutive Wimbledon titles, six French Opens, a pair of Masters. That will probably stand as a unique achievement in modern tennis. Mats Wilander will not, and should not, be asked to equal or surpass that record.

Perhaps, however, he will produce a more diversified list of triumphs. There is no reason why he should not add the Wimbledon and U.S. Open Championships to his growing collection. And as he pursues that goal, as he goes about his business in his own quiet way, we should not take his presence for granted.

It's easy to be straitjacketed by constant comparisons with Borg. It is complicated enough dealing with the burdens of being one of the two or three best players in the world before you have reached the age of 20.

Somehow, though, Wilander has kept his perspective at a time when his reputation is growing, in a period when there is a dizzying amount of money swirling around the game. Wilander is not obsessed with the dollar. He retains the old, simple virtues. Perhaps it's true that character is more easily kept than recovered. □