

Managing an enigma

After three Grand Slam finals there are still more questions than answers on Andy Murray. Can the Scot stop the speculation by delivering a first Wimbledon title for a champion-starved British public? **Iain Boyd** reports.



Andrew Barron Murray is an enigma. As unique as a rainless Wimbledon fortnight, the great British hope encapsulates everything that Britain is not. It's un-British to win things. But he does. It's un-British to rant and rave in a McEnroe style. But, I'm serious – he does. It's un-British to look miserable holding the runner's up trophy. You get the picture.

He's also nigh on impossible to understand, and I don't mean because of his thick Scottish brogue. But understand this. If there is one man to end the Brit's 75 year drought for a Wimbledon, nay Grand Slam title, it's ironically the one with 'Baron' as a middle name.

And with Tim Henman and his hill a distant memory, it's Murray and his mound that now, figuratively and literally, shoulder the weight of the Brits and their expectations. Yet it appears all isn't rosy in Murray's field.

So what gives? Well these days, after losing in the final of the Australian Open, it seems Murray goes walkabout. Having lost his first two Grand Slam finals to an unstoppable Roger Federer, in the US Open in 2009 and Australian Open 2010, the straight sets loss to Novak Djokovic this year came as a much harder pill to swallow.

Instead of relying on his envied killer instinct and undoubtedly natural talent to outmaneuver the confident Serb, Scotland's finest, sensing his best chance yet, seemed to micromanage his performance. He played in his conscious rather than subconscious, and imploded before exploding.

Meanwhile Djokovic was also on fire, but in the preferred sense. Fast-forward several months of mourning, soul searching and uncharacteristic losses later and you're up to speed.



So why change a formula that's impressively guided you to the final? John McEnroe, a huge Murray advocate, admits his infamous outburst at Wimbledon in 1981 was a result of his failure to break Bjorn Borg's stranglehold on the trophy the previous year, while bidding for his own first Wimbledon. And as Murray let fly at members of his player box in Melbourne, as a similar strong-minded perfectionist, the scars of previous failures were unpleasantly unveiled to the watching world in a parallel manner.

Yet the resilient "Superbrat" recovered and hoisted the 1981 trophy aloft – so 30 years on, can Murray follow suit? A Wimbledon semi-finalist for the last two years, the Scot is clearly at home on the English grass, and again like Mac, he revels rather than shies away under the intense spotlight. Any pressure therefore will be, as usual, self imposed and the only inconvenience he may face is an increase in media duties.

Coupled with a welcome return to form recently in Monte Carlo, where he exited in the semis to Nadal in three pulsating sets

and there are encouraging signs that he's set to go at least one better at Wimbledon this year. Or ... gulp ... two better?

Well, history shows only three guys men lost three finals or more and eventually won a slam, however in Murray's defense they arguably didn't face the same strength in depth of opposition. Ivan Lendl beat McEnroe to win the French in 1984 on his fifth attempt. Yet it's Andre Agassi, Murray's double handed inspiration who draws the best comparison, winning Wimbledon 1992 in his fourth final.

Agassi, much like Murray, was a lone maverick admired by many but wildly misunderstood by most. It wasn't until his decision to retire was shelved, in favour of a gamble to embrace the game that Agassi, one of few to have won all four Slams and eight in total, became a man.

So is it destiny that Murray, like Agassi, wins a first slam at Wimbledon while securing the hearts of his growing skeptics? Aussie commentator Wally Masur believes it's possible.

"He has got the tools to do it. Andy will win a major," Masur said. "It's just between the ears now and his mental state in those finals." Ironically, the man who won that Aussie final, Djokovic, has also promised greatness for so long but this year delivered



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as the best on tour in 2011, going unbeaten into May. So what has he changed?

"He's playing with a lot of character," Masur says of the Serbian.

"These are young men we are talking about and Novak's matured. Andy has somehow got to do the same thing."

It sounds straightforward but how does one flick the mental maturity switch? The answer may lie in employment of a coach who understands not only his game but, of significantly greater importance, what makes Murray, often a ticking time bomb, tick.

Murray, who is working temporarily with Darren Cahill as part of the Team adidas arrangement, is notoriously difficult to coach because of his strong views – but that, according to Masur, shouldn't be to the Scot's detriment.

"I like the fact that he is feisty. It's a good quality to have," says Masur. "Lleyton Hewitt was pretty feisty but took on the world. But with a new coach you have to respect them. Sometimes they are wrong. No coach is infallible. Ultimately it's about Andy meeting that coach half way and having a red hot day and you know what – just enjoy it."

Not that any of this is news to Murray. Indeed in recent interviews he agrees with Masur's sentiments – find a coach you respect, have fun, meet them half way, which is the mix he seems to have discovered with Cahill.

"One of the good things about him is that he has been around on tour for a long time and has also coached many people and so it wasn't as if he came in and didn't know quite how to go about it," said Murray, who parted way with Alex Corretja in March.

"He didn't say too much at the beginning and I am sure that when he gets to know me better then it'll be much easier. So far it's been nice and I like him as a person and I think he's a very good coach, so I am very happy."

The problem for a born winner like Murray is embracing the 'fun' in losing and the 'respect' portion that can't be magically created, but rather earned. Indeed sackings of high profile coaches Brad Gilbert and Alex Corretja among others emphasizes

ANDY MURRAY FAST FACTS

Born: Dunblane, Scotland, 15 May 1987

Lives: London, England

Height: 190cm **Weight:** 84kg

Career high ranking: No. 2
(August, 2009)

Current ranking: No. 4

Career titles: 16 singles, 1 doubles

Career prize money: \$US \$15,331,083



that some have ticked the 'fun' box but not 'respect' and vice versa.

Much has been made of mother Judy's controlling influence in Team Murray yet ultimately she is a person he respects above all and who understands him implicitly; the exact requirements on required coaches' CVs.

This year's star performers, Nadal and Djokovic, are blessed with respective father figures in Uncle Tony and Marian Vajda respectively, whom they trust implicitly and subsequently do the worrying and thinking for them.

Murray, on the other hand, has been left with an overactive mind and second-guessing his advice, leading to broken racquets and confused rage. Given Cahill is former coach to both feisty Hewitt and troubled Agassi both Wimbledon winners incidentally, he seems like the perfect candidate for the tempestuous Scot.

Coaching speculation aside, there seems no doubt that a mental shift and a more aggressive Murray are necessary ingredients for Wimbledon success. "His nature is to counter punch. To absorb pressure, then strike," Masur analyses. "I think over five sets against the big hitters it's like standing on the ropes too long and eventually he gets hit. It's more like Andy's got to go out and win Wimbledon."

As the usual suspects in this golden era eye the ultimate prize, this lone Scottish fighter stands out as a unique throwback to years gone by. Agassi, above all, showed it's possible to 'win grumpy' but also confirmed 'winning happy' is much more fun. To get the monkey off his back it's clear Murray, and the long-suffering British public, would take either.

And if he does? Well forget 'Baron', because you'd surely be calling him 'Sir' Andrew Barron Murray before long. ■