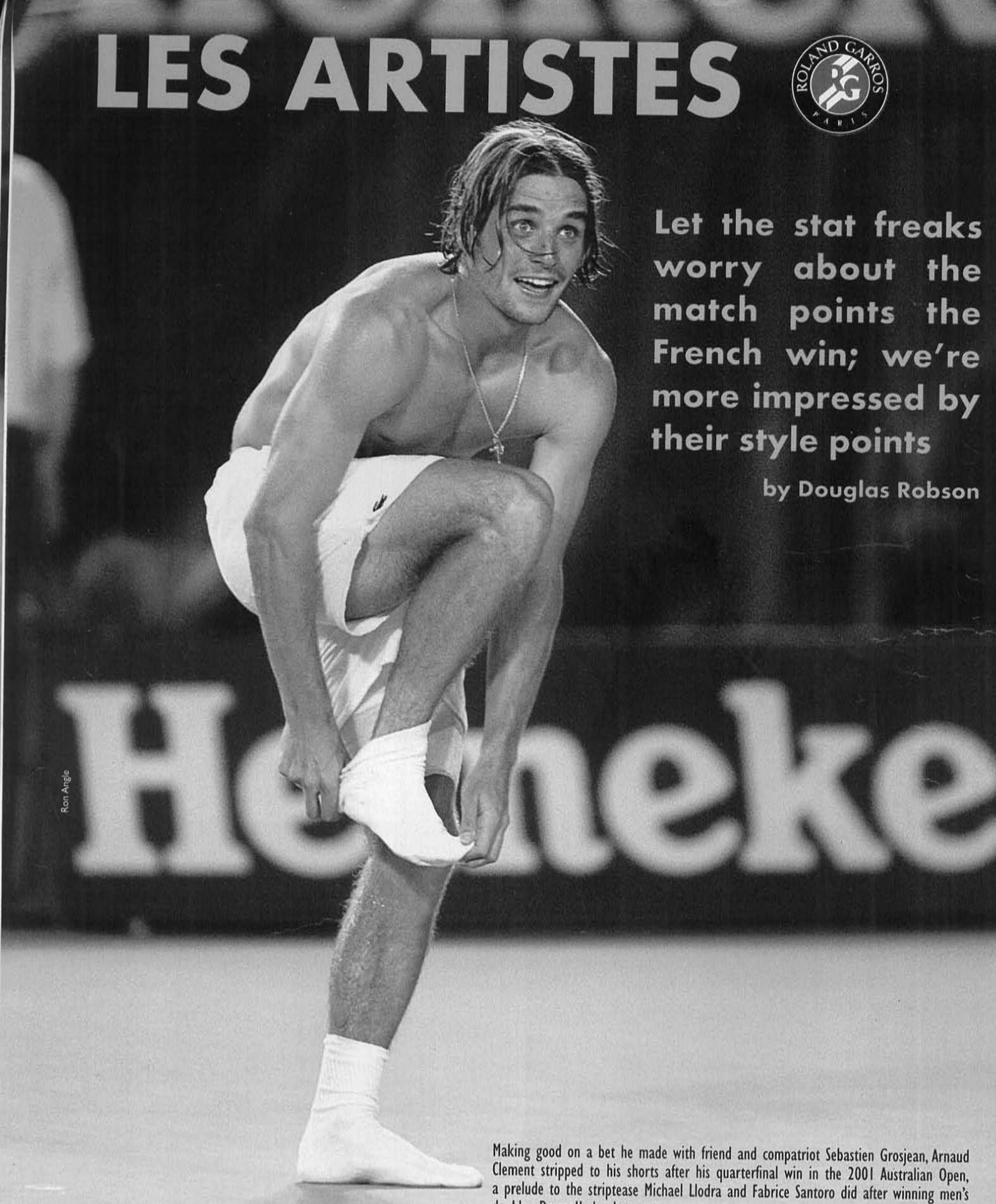
LES ARTISTES

Let the stat freaks worry about the match points the French win; we're more impressed by their style points

by Douglas Robson



Ron Angle

Making good on a bet he made with friend and compatriot Sebastien Grosjean, Arnaud Clement stripped to his shorts after his quarterfinal win in the 2001 Australian Open, a prelude to the striptease Michael Llodra and Fabrice Santoro did after winning men's doubles Down Under last year.

At 5'10" and 160 pounds, Fabrice Santoro gave away 8 inches, 40 pounds and fully a thousand ranking points to towering Swede Joachim Johansson at March's Pacific Life Open. It wasn't just a first round match; on paper, it was a mismatch, accentuated by Johansson's month-old triumph in Marseille and his tour-leading ace count.

But as he has done throughout his 16-year career, Santoro used his double-fisted forehand and backhand to paint a peculiar but dazzling array of slices, angles and off-speed shots that disrupted, and ultimately upended, the 6-foot-6 Swede.

A few courts away, the equally cagey Emilie Loit, she of the two-handed slice backhand, was busy dismantling Hungarian Petra Mandula in straight sets with her own beguiling repertoire. Other French players, ranging from the athletic Amelie Mauresmo to the quirky, fleet-footed Arnaud Clement, also scored early round wins during that first weekend in the California desert.

As the tennis scene shifts to Paris, the French bear watching. Not because they might walk away with the hardware — no native-born man has won Roland Garros in more than 20 years, and no French-born woman in almost 40 — but simply because they are the innovative artisans of the sport. With the court as a canvas and their palette a colorful assortment of spins, angles, trajectories and personalities, this group of fun-loving, free spirits brings to tennis what 19th century impressionists Degas, Monet and Renoir once did to the art world — a rejection of the formal standards of the day.

"It's like the law in France," says TV commentator and astute observer Mary Carillo of the French mentality. "You have to be original."

"We like to play with panache," says former player Loic Courteau. "Maybe it's the French touch, the French flair,.... It is something you cannot teach. It's something very personal, like an artist, a painter."

In a word, the French are unique. Unlike the academy-inspired big-serve, big-forehand mold of the United States, the dour, flat Czech style or the rally-breaking down-the-line tendencies of the Russian women, the French are to a man and a woman not one thing. Even more, something deep in the psyche of this country of 60 million people seems to produce players who strike the ball and use the court like nowhere else.

From Santoro's and Marion Bartoli's two-handed trickery to Sebastien Grosjean's slingshot forehand, to Loit's wicked slice to Michael Llodra's serve-and-volley attack game, to Mauresmo's all-court athleticism and rising star Gael Monfils' power, it's almost as if they see the 36' x 78' dimensions of the court through the free-thinking prism that this religiously, economically and ethnically heterogeneous nation demands.

"It's pretty tough to explain," says 32-year-old veteran Santoro, who epitomizes the French *façon*, or distinctive way of doing things. "The way we learn tennis in France is very open. If you play a certain way, you're going to keep going this way. We don't push you to play a certain kind of game, like from the baseline you have to make a lot of spin on everything. In France, you are free to play the tennis you want."

Mauresmo offers a more glib explanation. "It's the wine maybe," she says.

Whether the wine, the water or something deeper is a subject of debate and speculation. Some point to the varied regions and cultures in France, from the rocky and rainy north that sits across the English Channel and borders Belgium and Germany to the east, versus the sun-baked south, which sits along the Mediterranean Sea and touches Spain.

"When you come from the north, you play more on hard courts because it's raining and cold," says the Paris-born Llodra. "When you come from the south, it's more hot and you play more on clay and more outdoors."

Some chalk up stylistic variances to upbringing. For instance, the games of Santoro and Bartoli were formed primarily by their fathers/coaches. Others, like Dechy and Mauresmo, are strict products of the French Federation. Still, most fall somewhere in between, having spent time both on their own or with private coaches and also at the Federation's main training facility at Roland Garros.

"It's funny because we all come from different [backgrounds]," says Mauresmo, the only man or woman from France to ascend to the No. 1 ranking, which she held for five weeks last fall. "I'm a pure Federation product. Marion Bartoli is working with her dad since the beginning. Emilie Loit went out of the Federation pretty early. Fabrice has been working with his father also. We don't have like one kind of game or one kind of thinking because we don't follow the same road."

Indeed, the French have always marched to their own elegant drumbeat. In the early 1920s, Suzanne Lenglen transformed the game with her balletic style and became an international star. She was followed on the men's side by the Four Musketeers, who dominated Davis Cup with their imaginative play from the late 1920s through the early 1930s. Stade Roland Garros (now Court Philipe Chatrier) was built, in fact, so that the Musketeers would have a prominent venue in which to defend the 1927 Davis Cup title they won from the Americans.

World War II darkened many European tennis hopes, but the French Championships returned with a flourish in 1946. Marcel Bernard, a two-time mixed doubles champion at the French in the mid-30s, was to play mixed doubles again in 1946. But after being stood up by his partner, he entered men's singles, in which his best result had been a semifinal finish 10 years before. He wound up becoming the first French men's singles champion since Musketeer Henri Cochet in 1932 and the tournament's first lefty men's champion, period.

However, save for occasional moments of excellence during the next three decades, including Françoise Durr's 1967 women's singles title, that rich line stalled in the 1960s and 1970s when the French Federation tried to standardize the style of its promising players — the so-called "French Method." The approach discouraged unconventional shots of the day, such as western forehands and two-handed backhands, while favoring Eastern grips and one-handed slices, shots that had won players such as Margaret Court, Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall bushels of championships in those decades. Instead of producing champions, the rigid thinking homogenized the formerly vibrant French variety (not to mention personalities). Players also lost ground to other nations that were taking advantage of new racquet technologies that boosted power and allowed wristier shots.

"A generation of players could not hit a forehand because they were asked to have the same grip as the backhand side," says longtime journalist Alain Deflassieux of leading French

sports daily *L'Equipe*.

Yannick Noah, the free-swinging, dreadlock-wearing player who was raised in Cameroon, put that system to the test. According to former pro and Davis Cup captain Patrice Dominguez, who was recently appointed national technical director of the French Federation, when Noah won Roland Garros in 1983, he opened eyes to the French Method's flaws.

"We were very strict with this way of playing, but in the mid-80s, we decided to stop this," explains Dominguez, who has also served as a tournament promoter of ATP events, including the Monte Carlo Masters. "We had a number of players who were just quite similar, especially on the forehand side, and also on backhand. Same grips, same shots. We thought it was the wrong way to do it."

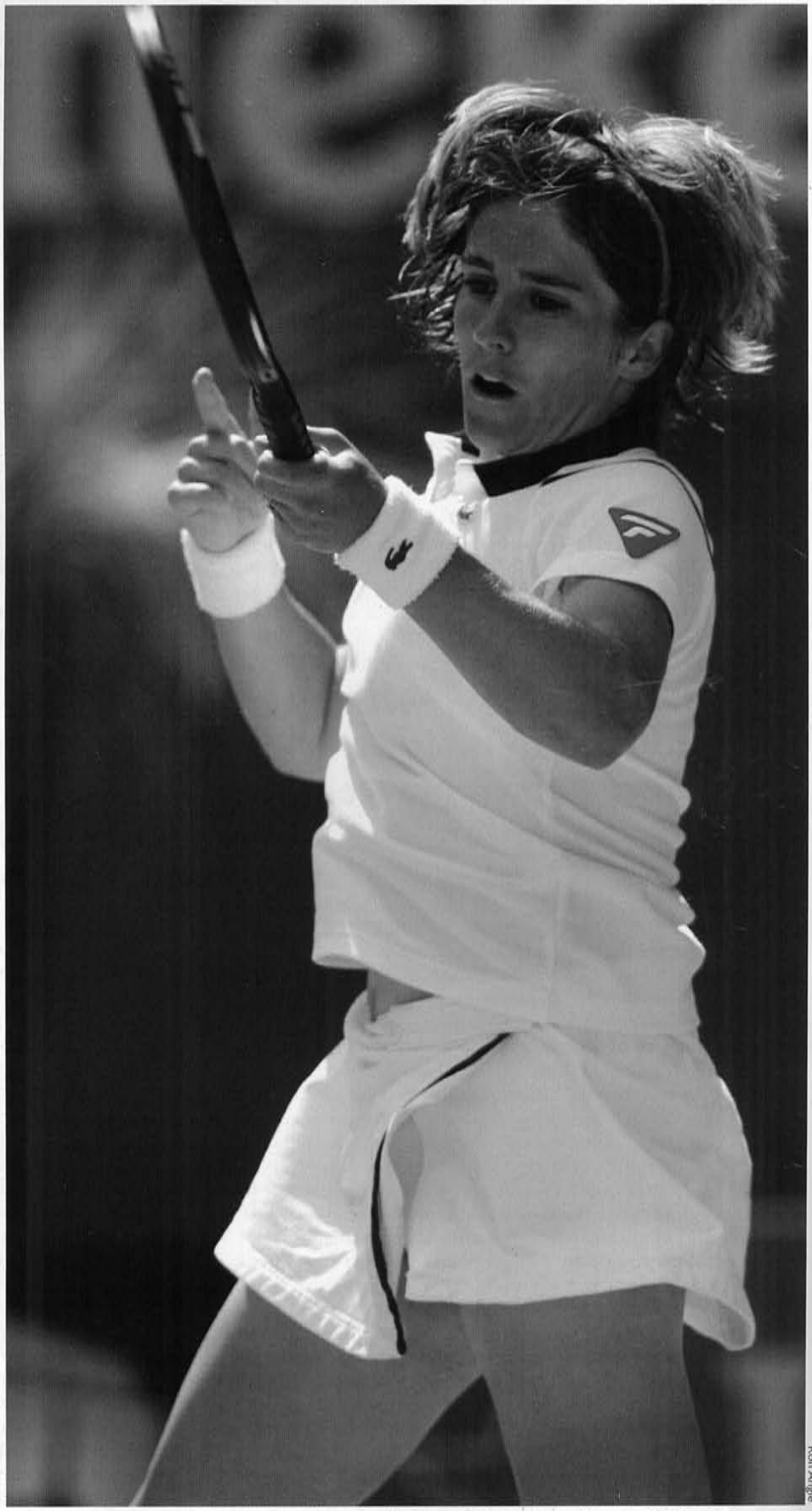
It wasn't just Noah's loopy topspin forehand — not even his best shot — that changed the mindset. The rise of players such as Bjorn Borg, Jimmy Arias and Aaron Krickstein, all with wicked forehand wings, helped turned the tide, as did the growing success of two-handed backhands wielded by the likes of Jimmy Connors and Chris Evert.

"We saw them and we thought, 'That is fantastic. We should change something and let players play with the grips they choose to use,'" recalls Dominguez. "Today, we try to respect the basic of the biomechanics, and we thought it was also important to keep the personality of the players."

Voila! The new *laissez-faire* mentality started to produce players with a rotisserie of styles, as well as big forehands, such as today's No. 1 Frenchman Grosjean and 18-year-old rising star Monfils. But it has also given rise in more modern times to flashy, if sometimes flawed, players such as Henri Leconte, Cedric Pioline and Mauresmo, whose talent should have produced multiple majors. (Each has competed in at least one Grand Slam tournament final and multiple semifinals.)

Still, to limit the French *façon* to shotmaking would be a mistake.

When the 6-foot-3 Llodra pulled a Houdini and popped naked out of Ivan Ljubicic's three-foot locker at March's NASDAQ-100 Open, it only underscored the obvious: The French possess a certain *je ne sais quoi* — even off the court.



Ron Angle

Emilie Loit's elfish build is quite a contrast to Amelie Mauresmo's broad-shouldered, well-defined frame. Such differences are the French spice of life.

"In France, we have a lot of crazy guys," says the jolly prankster Llodra, "especially me."

It's not just that the French play differently; they stand apart in how they look, dress, act and live. "It's not bread and butter with the French," says Carillo, "you have to put some sauce on it." A look around Indian Wells provided ample evidence this spring. There was Clement with his wrap-around sunglasses and the sleeveless-shirt wearing Mauresmo with her tattooed left arm. The French are ethnically diverse, from the lanky Monfils (who is black) and emerge from different origins of birth, such as the Canadian-born Mary Pierce and the Russian-born Tatiana Golovin. Several are married (Santoro, Grosjean, Llodra, Gregory Carraz and Nathalie Dechy, to name five) and travel with their young children. Some are even openly gay (Mauresmo). In short, there is nothing cookie cutter about them.

This is not to say that a nation such as the United States can't boast of similar diversity. But comparing the diversity among American tour players and the French is a bit like comparing a croissant to a Pillsbury breakfast biscuit. The French also seem to come in so many different sizes and shapes, from Escude and Llodra (tall and lanky) to Clement and Loit (short and elfish). Simply put, for it's size — one-fifth that of the United States — the country produces an amazing breadth of personality and style.

Unlike many single-minded countries, the French also seem to incorporate more balance into their tour lives. The players tend to bring their families along more than most. It is not at all unusual to see Grosjean, Llodra, Carraz and Santoro with their wives and kids. They sometimes make a point to be with their families at the expense of career. For instance, Santoro played Indian Wells but not Key Biscayne so he could be at home.

Then toward the other end of the spectrum from this well-grounded family life, the French play with a sometimes reckless *joie de vivre* on the court. It's as if the refined French esthetic — forget "Just Do It"; do it with *élan* — informs their approach to the game. The players are notorious for going for the tricky, but not always the smartest shot, and laughing about it even when failing.

Not unlike their uber-talented soccer and rugby squads, French players often have the ability to beat any opponent, but lack the mental toughness and sangfroid to do so consistently.

"We like to play with panache," says former player Loic Courteau, who now coaches Mauresmo. "Maybe it's the French touch, the French flair, like in rugby. It is something you cannot teach. It's something very personal, like an artist, a painter. We want to have fun, and we look to invent something. I think it's the country. We like to live, to have a good meal, a good bottle of wine. On the court, it's the same approach."

Says Grosjean, "You grow up like that here in the States, to become the best in your game, in your sport or in your business. In France, it's more to enjoy the game than to be

Fred Mullane

A two-time Wimbledon semifinalist and one-time Roland Garros semifinalist, Sebastien Grosjean freely concedes that the notion of being the best is an American thing, while "in France, it's more to enjoy the game than to be the best."

the best."

That preference for style over substance is why the French are avatars of innovation in tennis, the group that thinks outside the proverbial box. It's like their food: Nothing bland about it.

That, in turn, however, can have almost tragic consequences. Despite a wealth of talent, well-funded national programs and a rich tennis heritage, the French have a dismal record on the big stage. No male has won a major since Noah — a span of 83 Grand Slams — and the only female winner since Durr in 1967 was the Canadian-born, American-reared Pierce, who captured Roland Garros in 2000.

Not unlike their uber-talented soccer and rugby squads, French players often have the ability to beat any opponent, but lack the mental toughness and sangfroid — literally cold blood — to do so consistently. Sure, France won soccer's World Cup in 1998 and the European Championships in 2000, just as the national rugby team has reached the final in two of the five Rugby World Cups. But these teams, too, are widely considered capable of winning much more than they have.

The French, interestingly, have been more successful in Davis Cup and Fed Cup, winning both twice in the past 10 years.

"They have this free spirit quality that in the individual world of tennis doesn't serve them well in the consistency department," says U.S. Davis Cup captain Patrick McEnroe.

Veteran Dechy also points out that the French see their life as tennis professionals as merely one part of a more holistic existence. "There is a very big difference in the culture of Russian girls, for example, and the culture of tennis we have in France," she says. "When I started playing — and even now — my dad always told me, 'Tennis is a sport, a game and you have to enjoy it.' When you are young, we always look for the fun." The Russians, she says, "just have to win. That's the main goal."

This cultural quirk, beautiful but flawed, provides the perfect dramatic tension. It gives the French their color and appeal, not unlike the impressionist painters of the 1800s. The French might not always be effective, but they are never dull.

"At least it's not bland, blond, baseline, boring, baloney and cheese," says Carillo.

Touché. TW

Douglas Robson is a frequent contributor to Tennis Week. *He wrote about player development in South America in the April 19 issue.*