



DOUBLE ACT

By Alix Ramsay

Some coalitions were just meant to be: Morecombe and Wise, the two Ronnies, even Nick and Dave although, to be honest, their act could use a little work – it has hardly been a laugh a minute since they started running the country. Still, the point is, you cannot beat a good double act.

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ANDY MURRAY

When Andy Murray announced back on New Year's Eve that he was joining forces with Ivan Lendl, no one was quite sure what to make of it. Surely, Dunblane's most famous – and volatile – son could not be teaming up with old Stone Face. That will never work. But work it has.

As Murray begins his seventh Wimbledon campaign, he is a new man. Then again, by the time he began his seventh Australian Open campaign back in January, he was already changing fast and came within a backhand return of serving to reach his third consecutive final in Melbourne Park. The Murray who walked away from the Rod Laver Arena this year was a much improved and much happier man than the one who trudged home 12 months before. True enough, he was bitterly disappointed to have lost in five tense sets to Novak Djokovic – and to have taken nearly five hours to do it – but this time he knew he was on to something. This time, he had something positive to work on and, better still, he had a new mentor to show him how to do it.

"The match was important for many reasons," Murray said. "Obviously I wanted to win first and foremost. But also, after the year that Novak had last year, I think there's a very fine line between being No.1 in the world and being No.3 or No.4. I think that gap, I feel I closed it.

"My job is to surpass him and the guys in front of me. It will take a lot of hard work, and hopefully I can do it."

The problem for Murray – and most of the men in the locker room – is that he is playing against some of the greatest players ever to have picked up a racket. First it was Roger Federer who ripped up the record books and started all over again, then it was Rafael Nadal who chased Federer from continent to continent to make history. Then, last year, it was Novak Djokovic who made mincemeat of the statistics and proved himself nigh on unbeatable. But while Novak is still king of the hill, Roger and Rafa have not gone away. The world No.1 may have won three of the four major titles last year but Nadal took the French Open and Federer won the season-ending Barclays ATP World Tour Finals. ➤

Far from being disheartened by the massive task ahead of him if he is to win his first Grand Slam title, Murray has been invigorated by the challenge. The goals have been clearly marked out and Scotland's finest is working himself hard to achieve them.

After losing in the semi-finals of the US Open, Murray set himself a simple task: to move as far up the rankings as possible in what was left of the season. Within a month, he had picked up three titles – Bangkok, Tokyo and Shanghai – and had ousted Federer from the No.3 spot in the world pecking order. A nagging injury hampered the last couple of weeks of the year (and cost him the chance to finish the season as No.3) but he knew he was making up ground on the boys at the top. With that as a launch pad, and with Lendl by his side, he was ready for the new season. And he came within that backhand of serving for a place in another major final.

"You're always going to have people that doubt me and say 'he's not that good', 'he's not as good as them'," Murray said. "I'm aware that I still need to improve some things and win matches like the semi-final in Melbourne. It was so close. But I need to make that last little jump and I'm much closer than I was at this stage last year.

And Novak – I don't know how much he can keep improving but he played great tennis the whole of last year, made a big improvement but I think now I've started to improve and I think it's because of those guys that I'm playing as well as I am. I want to get to No.1. That's one of my goals this year and I'll try my best to do it."

Part of reaching that goal is Murray's new sense of peace and tranquillity off the court. Of course, there are still yelps of frustration when a seemingly makeable winner goes astray but with Lendl watching impassively from the courtside, the Scot tends to keep his feelings to himself these days. By keeping everything under control, Murray has found a new focus, one that lets him concentrate every ounce of his energy on the next point. It is still a work in progress but Lendl believes his new charge is rapidly getting the hang of it.

"You control it," Lendl said simply. "I think it's something you have to practise like everybody else. I was very pleased with the way Andy handled the final in Brisbane, where he was 6-1, 4-0 and the guy made a comeback. I was very pleased with that. He did not look at the box and shout at the box, he did not give up on any point. He played every point as hard as he could and I think that's the way forward for him."

Brisbane was their first tournament together but now, months later, the ever-maturing Murray is a different man. With the thought that Lendl knows exactly what Murray is going through – he lost his first four major finals before he made winning Grand Slam trophies his hobby – the Scot can relax and concentrate solely on the match ahead of him.

"It's kind of calming having someone like Ivan to talk to," Murray said. "He's helped with my confidence, I feel a lot stronger mentally, I feel very calm on the court.

"You've got to remember, I'm 25 years old. Everybody matures at different ages. Somebody like Rafa, I'd say was pretty mature when he was 19, 20 years old. Novak probably last year, everyone saying he was a different person and his results would suggest that. Mentally, he was much stronger than he was before and he probably grew up a year earlier than me, or six months earlier than me. That's kind of a progression in life, I think, rather than just tennis. I just think you become more mature, you start to deal with things a lot better."

And as Wimbledon gets under way, the most famous double act in town reckon they know just how to deal with whatever the next couple of weeks may bring. 🧐



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IVAN LENDL