

Inside the Davis Cup

Miriama and I recently worked as line umpires at the Davis Cup, NZ vs China, TSB stadium, New Plymouth. We had a fantastic time in spite of NZ losing the tie in the fifth set of the second reverse singles. I don't know how much has been heard but it was, in spite of the loss, an incredible event and just shows anything can happen in a tennis match. A lot of people have asked us what happened and how/why did NZ lose the Tie; Well here's the inside story.

Day one: 1st and 2nd singles

Dan King-Turner was on fire winning 6-3 6-2 6-4. I lost count of how many aces down the middle service line but there was at least eight during my rotation. After the match I asked chair umpire Dion Fernandes, of Blenheim Futures fame, how many aces he had marked off on his card, his reply, was that he couldn't remember the exact number but that Dan had only had to defend two service game break points the whole match!!! That's truly an amazing performance.

Rubin Statham (current ranking singles 421 doubles 380) 5th D/C appearance for NZ played Yan Bai (singles ranking 508). Rubin dropped a nervous first set 4-6 then went on to win convincingly 4-6 6-3 6-4 6-2. Yes Davis cup is played over 5 sets like the Grand Slams. However, in the last game disaster struck (the full extent not realised until the final results). While chasing a wide ball and putting his body on the line Rubin fell and in the process badly injured his thumb. This was all kept hush hush of course, not wanting the Chinese to know.

Day 2: the doubles, (oh dear) GD Jones (ranked 506) in for Rubin to partner Dan (ranked 184) against the Chinese guys ranked 150=. It wasn't long before GD Jones was getting really pounded off his second serve and absolutely even more pounded when at the net which he did handle sort of OK. It was truly an aggressive and exciting match – fantastic. Dan must have been freaked out because he seemed to want to make up for the missing Rubin and in one rally was so out of position he got smacked in the back with a GD cross court ground stroke!!! The pivotal moment in this match was the eighth game of the second set. Serving at 3-4 the Chinese were Love – 40 down and went on to hold serve. It was at this point in the tie that many of us had a very foreboding feeling. Dan served next and of course instead of serving for the set at 5-3 was serving at 4 all. And he dropped his serve (the first time he had been broken in the tournament) so the Chinese served for the set at 5-4 and won. The Kiwis fought hard in the third to take it 7-5 but the damage had been done with the doubles going to the Chinese 6-2 6-4 5-7 6-4. The second day NZ 2 China 1

And so to the 3rd day and the reverse singles. Expectations were high for Dan, first up as his serving had been awesome. NZ only needed one more win to take it out. But, oh no, he had a complete shocker, quite a number of double faults, shots hit into the net and out the back and out the side, it was unbelievable and he lost in straight sets 6-4 6-3 6-3 to the same player that Rubin trounced in the first day. There was a stunned silence in the stadium. The only credit that could be given to him was that he didn't spit the dummy. In hindsight I think he didn't handle the pressure knowing that Rubin was out and GD had to play the second reverse singles. He was tight the whole way through (and I know what that's like). So it was now up to GD to do the job for NZ. A five set three hour spectacle of unbelievable tennis. Blow for blow, neck and

neck, the match was full of fantastic rallies and winner shots with very few points from errors just about none from unforced and not too many points from forced errors either. The crowd were beside themselves and the noise for GD was deafening on every point. This has to be the best singles match I have had the pleasure to be involved in (Davis Cup rocks). All tied up at two sets all it was almost too much to bear. I had goose bumps and the hair on the back of my neck was standing up (that's really something given how little hair there is these days). Trainer strategically called for GD and then a medical time out with serious leg cramps, he's not a big guy and fairly slim. But the writing was on the wall as slowly but surely victory slipped away. So close but yet so far. GD saved game point and break point time after time and the crowd was hysterical. I would say the biggest match of his career. A huge affirmation from the crowd at the inevitable end. Even right up to the last game he saved a number of tie points. China took it 6-3 6-7 7-5 4-6 6-3

Highlights for me; the first day's two singles with Dan's serving and Rubin's sheer determination and gutsy grind out and, of course, the last five set reverse singles match. Calling centre serve and looking down the line at my daughter calling centre serve at the other end. Many many served balls crashing into the back drop as Miriama ducked under yet another serve exploding off the centre serve line. Oh yes, and the loudest 'Haka' I have ever heard, performed by 50 boys from New Plymouth Boys College at the opening ceremony.

What now? Well, Miriama and I have been selected and we are off to work the two major tour events in Auckland in January. You've gotta be there!!!

John Flatt