

Blame it on rain

WIMBLEDON

AP, Wimbledon

Who could blame Rafael Nadal and Robin Soderling for being a bit sick and tired of each other and, well, Wimbledon as a whole?

They did, after all, spend an awful lot of time trying to finish their third-round match, until the No. 2-seeded Nadal finally won 6-4, 6-4, 6-7 (7), 4-6, 7-5 Wednesday, more than 90 hours after the pair first stepped on Court 1 to warm up.

Still, the on-court animosity and verbal shots traded afterward were hardly in keeping with the genteel setting. The usually affable Nadal, in particular, had harsh words for Soderling -- and questioned tournament organizers.

"He's a strange guy," Nadal said. "I've said 'Hi' to him at least seven times since I've been on the tour and he's never answered back. I asked other players about it. It doesn't only happen to me."

Nadal was critical of the way Soderling appeared unconcerned when the three-time French Open champion fell to the turf at one point. Nadal also didn't like the way Soderling pumped a fist instead of offering the customary "sorry about that" wave of a hand after winning a

point with the help of a favourable net cord.

"He must have been in his complaining mood today," the 28th-seeded Soderling said. "If my opponent gets a lucky shot and he doesn't say, 'I'm sorry,' I don't care. For me, it's OK. Why should I say I'm sorry when it's the happiest moment of my life?"

The last straw for Nadal: What he considered a halfhearted handshake at the net when their marathon ended.

"After four days," Nadal said, "that's not normal."

Told of Nadal's comments, Soderling responded: "I'd probably say the same, but I won't do that. I keep it to myself."

On Monday, Soderling was upset that Nadal persisted in his slow, between-point rituals that many players have complained about, including Andre Agassi at Wimbledon last year. With Nadal ready to serve the opening game of the fifth set, Soderling walked deliberately to the sideline to change rackets -- sending a message.

When Soderling returned to the baseline, Nadal stopped his service motion and held up the ball, as if to say, "Ready now?" That's when Soderling turned away from Nadal and tugged at the back of his shorts, mimicking one of the

Spaniard's habits and drawing guffaws from fans.

Remember, that all happened Monday, when there were three rain delays -- including one right after Nadal missed a forehand on match point at 7-6 in the third-set tiebreaker. By the time they had to stop Monday night after 8 p.m., Soderling had won that set and the fourth, too. Nadal, though, led 2-0 in the fifth.

When they picked up again Tuesday, they got in a total of 19 minutes, enough for Soderling to even the set at 4-all. Sometimes, matches don't resume immediately after rain stops because weather reports predict more precipitation on the way, but Nadal and Soderling were ushered out onto court for stints of eight and 11 minutes.

"That's very tough for the players," said Nadal, last year's Wimbledon runner-up. "They don't think very much about the players here, maybe."

He and Soderling originally were scheduled to play Saturday, and they began hitting at 4 p.m. that day. But drizzles forced them off before the match actually began, and then came the traditional day off on the middle Sunday.

"I didn't understand why we didn't play on Sunday," Nadal said. "The weather was OK, so much

better than yesterday, Monday and today, too."

It took him about 20 minutes to close it out Wednesday, and he celebrated by dropping to his knees, as though the championship were his. Instead, Nadal or No. 4 Novak Djokovic -- who completed a three-day, 7-6 (4), 6-7 (6), 6-2, 7-6 (5) victory over Nicolas Kiefer -- faces the prospect of playing on seven consecutive days if either makes it to Sunday's final.

Then again, who knows whether the men's final will be played Sunday? It's rained on eight of nine days so far, including Wednesday.

"I've got nothing to do next week," two-time finalist Andy Roddick said with a smile, "so I'm here as long as I keep going."

All the remaining men are scheduled to play Thursday, including four-time reigning champion Roger Federer -- who's been off since Friday. He avoided all of the rain hassles because his fourth-round opponent withdrew with an injury.

"We've been stuck in a locker room for nine hours a day, and he's been chilling out taking the double-decker bus tour, maybe," Roddick said. "Given the choice, I'll take a living room over a locker room."

Jagielka signs for Everton

AFP, Liverpool

Sheffield United defender Phil Jagielka on Wednesday became Everton's first summer signing when he penned a five-year deal.

The 24-year-old's four-million-pound (8 million dollar) move comes just one day after the Blades' appeal over their relegation to the Championship was dismissed. Jagielka had a clause in his contract allowing him to leave if the club went down.

"When I played here last season the fans were fantastic and hopefully I'll get to run out sooner rather than later," he told Everton's website.

Middlesbrough, Wigan and Bolton were all interested in signing Jagielka, but the player made it clear from the start that Everton were his first choice, and the deal has only been held up while Sheffield United have been engaged in their legal battle with the Premier League.

Ranieri's great expectations

INTERNET, undated

Juventus boss Claudio Ranieri has stressed that he expects big things from his newly-promoted Bianconeri side in the coming season.

The excitement in Turin has been growing ever since the Old Lady secured their return ticket to Serie A, but it remains to be seen whether a summer spending spree will be enough to regain a place amongst the Scudetto contenders.

After miraculously delivering Parma from relegation last term, Ranieri is full of confidence and isn't ready to accept anything less than the best.

"We have a burning desire for victory -- it's in our DNA," he explained in Hurra Juventus magazine. "First we'll demonstrate it domestically, and then in Europe."

"I can guarantee I will tell my players the one thing I have always said in my career -- I don't care who we're playing, I just want to win."

However, the ex-Fiorentina tactician was willing to admit that it may take a little time to turn Cadetti champions into top-flight heavy-weights.

"The fans must understand that rebuilding a squad and returning it to its past glories will take some time," he admitted.



PHOTO: AFP

Chilean Sebastian Rocco (R), wearing a Mexican T-shirt, celebrates with his teammate Pablo Contreras (L) after playing out a goalless draw with Mexico to earn a quarterfinal place at the Copa America in Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela on Wednesday.

Torres sets lofty goal

AFP, Liverpool



Fernando Torres believes he can do what fellow countryman Fernando

Morientes failed to do and establish himself as an Anfield goalscoring hero after being unveiled as Liverpool's most-expensive ever signing.

Morientes, who joined the Merseyside club from Real Madrid in January 2005, lasted just 16 months before returning to Spain with Valencia after a disappointing return of eight goals in 41 league outings in England.

He struggled to adapt to the physical demands of the Premiership yet Torres, who has been handed the famous No 9 shirt after signing a six-year 90,000-pound-a-week (181,000 dollar) contract, insisted he could cope with the bruising side of the English game after costing Liverpool 22 million pounds (44 million dollars) from Atletico Madrid.

"I don't think adapting to the physical side will be a problem," Torres, scorer of 91 goals in 243 Atletico appearances, said.

"I've seen Premiership games on television and I know it's harder to get a free-kick in England than it is in

Spain."

Torres said he could cope with the pressure of scoring the goals to help his new club sustain a serious title challenge. Despite winning the Champions League in 2005 and reaching the final in May, Liverpool have not been crowned league champions since the 1989-90 season.

"I don't have any fear of the responsibilities that lie in front of me at Liverpool," added the 23-year-old Spanish international. "It's not something that worries me."

"I'm totally aware that the expectations here are extremely high and that people will want me to score lots of goals. I'm confident I can do that."

Torres, who has previously been linked with Manchester United and Chelsea, admitted he thought long and hard about leaving Atletico, the club he supported as a boy, before committing the best years of his career to Liverpool.

He spoke to Jose Reina, the Liverpool keeper and Luis Garcia, who left Anfield earlier this week to join Atletico, before making up his mind.

"I have had offers from other clubs in the past, but when I learned of Liverpool's interest I asked Atletico Madrid to listen to the offer," Torres said.

"I'm 23 years old and it's a great

age to be making a move like this. I felt I had gone as far as I could at Atletico. I want to set myself new targets and goals, and play in the Champions League.

"To be really considered a truly great player you have to play for one of the great clubs. Liverpool are a great club."

Torres has finished top scorer for Atletico in each of the last five seasons, but Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez, who has now taken his spending to 121 million pounds since 2004, believes the player's goals record can get even better.

"If you analyse the figures," Benitez said, "he was a footballer playing first team football at 17-years-old and it is very difficult to score goals consistently at that age."

"Then Atletico Madrid were not a top four team and Torres was playing up front on his own."

"But if you read the comments of the Madrid supporters they say he couldn't have worked any harder for the team."

"To score the goals he has at his age, every season, shows he has great potential and he has the capacity to improve. I hope that at a big club surrounded by good players he will get even better."

Premiership lures Asian tycoons

Football

AFP, Hong Kong

Wealthy Asian businessmen are competing to buy top-flight English football clubs, attracted by the irresistible combination of profit and sporting glory.

Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire football fanatic who was Thai prime minister until ousted by the military last year, now owns 66 percent of Manchester City and looks close to completing a takeover.

And directors at promoted Premiership side Birmingham City have recently agreed to sell 30 percent of their shares to Hong Kong tycoon Carson Yeung, despite reported interest in the club from Indian steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal.

Industry experts say the trend is

likely to continue as English football becomes ever more popular among Asia's vast and increasingly wealthy population -- bringing with it the promise of booming income from TV rights and merchandise.

"Asian businessmen want to own English football teams because they see Asia, particularly India and China, as the biggest developing market for the Premiership," said Philip Long, football specialist at London accountancy firm PKF.

"The worldwide love of football is focused at the moment on the English game, and the Asian fan base is well-established and growing fast."

But Long warns that Asian investors are not just signing another business deal when they buy into the Premiership.

"Anyone investing in football is making a partly rational, partly

romantic decision. That can be a dangerous mix," he said.

"It is a different type of investment to any other."

"Undoubtedly these businessmen know it is a sector that involves a great deal of publicity, and perhaps that's what they want. But when you buy a football club, you are taking on many responsibilities."

"During a losing streak, you must expect to have thousands of people chanting abuse at you."

"Fans can be very fickle and their financial investment in the club is probably limited to their season ticket, even if they have a huge emotional investment."

Long has a word of warning both for Asian businessmen craving a Premiership team and for fans who imagine a wealthy Asian buyer may turn their club into world beaters.

"There is growth in the game

now but perhaps it will plateau out soon like Formula One," he said.

"And we will see which of these deals actually goes through. Talking about buying a club is one way to attract headlines, but it is a different matter to completing the sale."

One British academic who is advising an overseas consortium on Premiership takeover targets agrees that it is an investment area characterised by high drama and risk.

"English soccer is the biggest league in the world with a global audience and hence is attracting international interest," he said, on condition of anonymity.

"The prestige and status are unique, and new television deals are perceived as offering new value. But the downside is that the current owners are extracting the surplus value when they exit."

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