

FIVE MINUTE MAJOR: Canadian tennis rests solely on the shoulders of Raonic

By Jake Courtepatte

Milos Raonic was fighting back tears when he took questions after his semifinal loss to Andy Murray in the Australian Open. It was a lot of emotion for the stoic Canadian tennis star, who must be feeling the heavy burden of being his country's hopeful for entry into the elite tennis world.

It can certainly be argued that another name on the tour, 25-year old Vasek Pospisil of Vernon, British Columbia, is slowly on the rise.

Though he bowed out in the first round of the Open to 14th-seed Gilles Simon of France in four sets, he did win the 2014 Wimbledon doubles title with partner Jack Sock and is currently ranked 40th in world singles.

Eugenie Bouchard, the 21-year old from Montreal, has struggled mightily since winning the WTA's Most Improved Player Award in 2014, falling to number 58 in women's world rankings.

But Raonic's play has risen to a level never before seen in Canadian tennis. The biggest mover among the top 15 in ATP rankings following the Open, Raonic moved up to eleventh, though his career best remains fourth in May of 2015, shortly after losing in the quarterfinals of the Madrid Open to Murray.

Following that match, Raonic seemed pleased with his efforts despite the loss.

"It was a good match for what it was," he said last May. "I just tried to fight through. I tried to make the most of the opportunities and considering everything, it was pretty good."

Fast forward to last month's match between the two in the Aussie Open semis, the seventh meeting and a rubber match, with each winning three prior. In a marathon match that lasted more than four hours, the Canadian bowed out after five sets.

His reaction to the loss was an indication of the leaps and bounds he expects his game to have made in nine short months. He smashed his racket in a fit of frustration, something unseen from the usually well-collected Raonic.

"I couldn't push off, I couldn't get up to serve, and I couldn't change direction," said Raonic, almost overcome with emotion in the post-match press conference. "Probably the most heartbroken I've felt on court."

"I'm in a much better state than I was eighteen months ago when I was in my first semifinal of a Grand Slam. It just happened to play out like this."

It's become clear that Raonic has reached the point in his career that all great athletes eventually do, where they expect to win. A younger Raonic may have been content with reaching a semi, or even the quarterfinal of an ATP-sanctioned tournament, while this Raonic, with eight career titles under his belt, expects more.

And Canadians' expectations have moved beyond breaking into the tennis circles into winning a major.

He's not the first tennis player ever asked to put his country on the map, nor will he be the last. In 2014, Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov made a name for himself by besting Murray in the quarterfinals at Wimbledon and almost taking down Novak Djokovic in the semifinals, with nary a peep since. Kai Nishikori became the first male from an Asian country to reach a Grand Slam final at the 2014 US Open, bowing out to Marin Cilic in the final.

Though Nishikori remains ranked 7th in the world, a Grand Slam title still eludes him.

As Canadians, we can only hope that the same "always the bridesmaid, never the bride" story doesn't play out for Raonic. Since 2014, he has reached at least the quarterfinal in three of the four majors, but is still looking for a final appearance.

But at the ripe old age of 25, it's now or never for the Canadian born in Monte Carlo, Monaco. Injuries have plagued him for his entire career, though he also still throws out the same old tired explanations, go to the net more, give one-hundred per cent, be more aggressive.

Maybe he just needs to find the right combination of idioms. Canadians will be waiting with bated breath.