

Gilbert, Who Won 'Ugly,' Tries to Bring Back British Tennis

By Ravi Ubha

Sept. 1 (Bloomberg) -- British men's tennis may have its best opportunity to win a Grand Slam title in 70 years thanks to a Scottish teenager, and an American coach who John McEnroe once said didn't deserve to play on the same court as him. Andy Murray, 19, is rated fourth most likely to win the U.S. Open in New York by U.K. bookmaker William Hill Plc, the highest for a Briton since Fred Perry dominated the game in the 1930s. Murray on Aug. 16 became the only person other than world No. 2 Rafael Nadal to beat eight-time Grand Slam winner Roger Federer this year, and last week entered the top 20 for the first time.

Murray's chances of succeeding Federer as U.S. Open champion may depend on Brad Gilbert, hired by the London-based Lawn Tennis Association in July to coach Murray and help develop talent in Britain. Gilbert, who used a defensive game to win 20 tournaments as a player, coached Andre Agassi to six Grand Slams and Andy Roddick. He also wrote the book "Winning Ugly."

"Brad Gilbert is the kind of guy that can be very helpful, because he's a road rat, a street fighter, and an ugly player," said Nick Bollettieri, another of Agassi's former coaches. "Andrew Murray is not a pretty player, either. You have a great combo there."

Murray advanced to a second-round match against Italy's Alessio di Mauro by defeating Robert Kendrick of the U.S. in four sets on Aug. 30.

Gilbert, 45, quit his job as an analyst with Walt Disney Co.'s ESPN to join U.K. tennis's governing body after signing a three-year deal. He'll work mostly with Murray and spend eight to 10 weeks a year helping coaches and younger players in a bid to revive the nation's tennis.

Wade the Last

The U.K. hasn't produced a Grand Slam winner since Virginia Wade took Wimbledon in 1977.

Former top-10 regulars Tim Henman, 31, and Greg Rusedski, 32, have been Britain's standard-bearers for the past decade. Only Rusedski, who lost to Henman in the first round two days ago, has reached a Grand Slam final -- at the U.S. Open in 1997.

"We've been the social security of the tennis world for years," said Alan Jones, who coached England's Jo Durie to the women's top five.

Britain's Davis Cup team is on the verge of slipping to the third tier, with captain Jeremy Bates quitting after a loss to Israel in July. The last of the team's nine titles in the sport's most prestigious team competition was in 1936, when Perry was the man to beat.

"I'm no magician," Gilbert said. "I can't guarantee anything. Everyone thinks that, boom, I just can touch people and get results."

From the Stands

Gilbert, who wears a cap and sunglasses while watching his students from the stands, is used to producing winners. After working together for eight years, Agassi called Gilbert "the greatest coach of all time."

Then came Roddick. Gilbert led him to the 2003 U.S. Open title and No. 1 ranking before their relationship soured and Roddick's game stagnated. Roddick fired Gilbert in December 2004 because he said it was "best for his game."

Gilbert will be keeping an eye on another court during the tournament. He's being sued by his management company, Creative Sports and Entertainment Inc., for breach of contract. Robert Miller, a lawyer with Reed Smith LLP who represents the company, said that Creative Sports is seeking \$788,000.

The suit alleges Gilbert hasn't paid his agent fees relating primarily to the LTA deal. Gilbert is earning \$3.9 million plus bonuses to work with Murray, Miller said.

Gilbert declined to comment on the lawsuit at the Open.

As a player, Gilbert lacked an attacking weapon and had a second serve that rivals dubbed "a melon." He still reached No. 4 in the world, won more than \$5.5 million in prize money, split eight matches against Agassi and won four of nine against Pete Sampras, the record 14-time Grand Slam champion.

'The Worst'

McEnroe, a seven-time Grand Slam winner, lost his temper when Gilbert beat him for the first -- and only -- time.

"Gilbert, you don't deserve to be on the same court with me," McEnroe said during the 1985 match. "You are the worst."

In his book, "You Cannot be Serious," McEnroe was grudging in his praise. "He was a pusher -- his second serve was a melon, his volleying was fairly shaky, but he got everything back."

Murray fired England's Mark Petchey, whose highest ranking was 80th, as his coach and switched agents in the past year.

Drop Shots

McEnroe's former doubles partner Peter Fleming said Murray is heeding Gilbert's advice, cutting out the drop shots that hand the initiative to opponents and adopting a more aggressive stance on court.

"Petchey was talking to him until he was blue in the face saying no more drop shots, and Murray looked at him like he was crazy," said Fleming, a U.K.-based tennis analyst for the past 13 years. "At least when Gilbert says it, what's he going to do, say 'You don't know what you're talking about?'"

Gilbert, who tends to talk to anyone sitting in the stands next to him, said he likes to think his passion "rubs off."

"I played, I coached, I commentated, I coached again," he said. "I love tennis, and to me it's not brain surgery. It's something I know well and enjoy."