

They can't all have storybook finishes

They can't all be Lance Armstrong or Pete Sampras.

Take Andre Agassi. He ended his career in the third round of the U.S. Open, despite an illustrious career. Sure, his eight career Grand Slam titles are dwarfed by Sampras' record 14, but Agassi showed he could play on anything by winning at least one Slam on each

surface (rebound ace, clay, grass, hard court.) Let's not forget that he is the owner of 52 other titles. At the beginning of 1998, he was also No. 141 in the world. At the end of that year, he was just outside the top 5. And yes, he got to No. 1, many times.

Take Lindsay Davenport, who holds her cards to her chest, but who also may have played her last major. Early in her career, she struggled with her weight, but eventually grew into her 6-foot-1 frame, and was one of the players, along with the Williams sisters, to step up the power game after Monica Seles.

At 30, she has been world No. 1, won 51 singles titles, including three Grand Slams and has also done the career comeback thing. Like Agassi, though, she finds herself plagued by injuries and unable to compete with the likes of the pocket-sized Justine Henin-Hardenne.

You don't, however, take anything away

from the Lances and the Petes. There's a lot of respect, and an air of invincibility. If you can go out on top, that's nice, too.

Take Martina Navratilova. Her

second retirement didn't make many waves, but the 49-year-old will take her 59th major home win a mixed-doubles championship with Bob Bryan. Her second wind has moved tennis fans

and nonfans alike to push themselves harder. The 'old lady' with a body of a 30-year-old still gets her pick of doubles partners, which was how she ended up with Bryan, one half of a team of twins ranked No. 1 in doubles. Her partner in womens doubles was Nadia Petrova, No. 6 in singles. Watching their matches, the peculiar part was that Petrova, who's 24, appeared to be the player being picked on by opponents.

The moral of the story? You win some and you lose some, and that's OK. When they lose, as Agassi and Davenport did against their nemeses so many times, the heart and effort of the fight ends up endearing fans more than the trophy.

Not everyone can win all the time, but most of us know what it's like to lose, and with respect that just as much.

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An open letter to Andy Roddick

Andy, Andy, Andy. I get it. It must be hard, trying to carve out your piece of history playing alongside the likes of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. It took you awhile to try to adjust, but finally last year, you hired all-American bad boy Jimmy Connors to help you with your game. It seemed to work — at first. He helped you shore up that weak backhand of yours, and encouraged you to be more aggressive, to come into the net. You reclaimed your spot as the top-ranked American male. You made it to the 2006 U.S. Open final, and even though you lost to Federer, you had to be encouraged by your best Grand Slam showing in more than a year.



Nafari Vanaski

But the worm has turned this year, hasn't it, Andy? In Australia, Federer beat you again in the semifinals. The second-set score was 6-0. Ouch. At the French Open, possibly your least-favorite event, you lost in the first round to some guy named Igor Andreev, and headed straight to London to get some practice at Wimbledon. How did that work out? Not great, Andy, not great. You lost in a quarterfinal debacle against Richard Gasquet, in a match in which you had a 2-0 set lead before it all fell apart.

Trying to shake it off, you headed to Indianapolis. You looked good — until the semifinals on Saturday, where you lost to Canadian Frank Dancevic. Did you know, Andy, that Dancevic's 2007 win-loss record before that tournament was 9-12? After the match, you claimed you had a stomach

bug, but on Monday, you admitted that a late-night fast-food meal slowed you down.

Andy, I'm ashamed of you. Are you nuts? A Big-Mac? A Taco Supreme? Can't you afford real food? You're a millionaire, for crying out loud!

Almost worse than that, you had the audacity to say that you didn't put a lot of stock in the Dancevic loss because you weren't playing at full strength. Is that right? First: Whose fault is that? Did Coach Connors force a Whopper Jr. down your throat? Second: Face it, Andy, the fast food might not have made a difference. You are at a crossroads. (Please don't enter the Wendy's.) When you first started on the tour, you dominated a lot of players with your 150-mph serves and big forehand. Now that they've adjusted, what are you going to do? When you hired Connors, you wanted to be able to beat Federer. Truth is, if you want to beat Federer, you'll have to get to more finals. If you want to get to more finals, you have to stop making excuses and start strengthening your weaknesses. That means learning how to volley. And not that chopping motion you've been perfecting, either. Developing more variety on your backhand wouldn't hurt either, now that you can actually hit one.

So get to work, Andy. Don't kid yourself by thinking that with your current arsenal that you can go to battle with Federer or Nadal. If you've got your hands full with the Dancevics of the world, you're just not ready.

Nafari's tennis column hits center court Wednesdays in the Trib p.m. She can be contacted at nvanaski@tribweb.com.

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U.S. Open was well worth the wait

When my family and I approached the National Billie Jean King Tennis Center for our day at the U.S. Open, we were greeted by two lines: one for people without a bag, and one for visitors with bags.

We made a quick decision and sent our favorite relative back to the car with all our belongings.

Waiting in lines is a big part of sporting events, almost a sport in itself. You have to always be on the alert, memorizing the scalp of the person in front of you, just in case you turn away and someone tries to jockey for position from behind you.

There is a small satisfaction in finally getting to a cashier, and knowing that the person behind you is still behind you.

Because of a rained-out Saturday session, there was a full day of tennis awaiting us, which started off with the end of Andre Agassi's career-ending loss to a player, Benjamin Becker, who will doubtless be the question to a Jeopardy! answer one day, and only that.

We walked around, and saw two-time Grand Slam champion Mary Pierce lose to up-and-comer Na Li, of China on the grandstand court. Next court over, there was drama in the first round of the junior tournament, with the seventh seed, Petru-Alexandru Lucanu, of Romania, coming a long way to lose in a dogfight to U.S. wild card Chase Buchanan.

Jogging by the match was women's fifth seed Nadia Petrova.

And if you wanted to know if Maria Sharapova was still playing, just walk by Arthur Ashe stadium.

It's the centerpiece of the tennis complex and seats nearly 23,000 people. Yet, you could hear Sharapova's shrieking through and above the thick walls.

As tempting as it was to

endure the grunting and try to get into Ashe to see James Blake after Sharapova, we were holding golden tickets to the smaller venue, Louis Armstrong Stadium, and passes to see Roger Federer, who may go down as the best male tennis player ever.

While American Vince Spadea tried everything to eke out a point, Federer appeared to merely be working on his game. He tried out his slice, placing varying angles and depths on them, and somehow making it look like he was barely moving his racquet.

The audience, full of hardened tennis fans hoping Spadea would at least win a set, was reduced to gasping at Federer's mastery.

The match ended around 11:15 p.m., and as we dragged our carcasses to the car, we passed by the area where we'd spent more than an hour waiting in line.

Was it worth it? "Let's do it next year," my cousin said.

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A mixed bag at All England Club

In life, there are a million questions for which there seems no answer. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? What does Barack Obama have against wearing a tie?

More perplexing still: Why hold Wimbledon during the one time of year it seems guaranteed to rain?

There are more questions where those came from, especially when it comes to the contenders at the All-England Club. Roger Federer seems a lock for his fifth Wimbledon title, but what about French Open champion Rafael Nadal?

He proved last year that he could be dangerous on any surface by reaching the final at Wimbledon.

Nadal could possibly do it again. It's a different surface for him, but Nadal just kept escalating his game last month at Roland Garros. He's so young, and so eager to keep improving. But even he wouldn't dream of getting ahead of himself, though, by envisioning himself with the big trophy on July 8.

There are also a few questions surrounding third-seeded Andy Roddick, even though he has the legendary Jimmy Connors in his corner. He hasn't made a lot of noise at Grand Slams since they teamed up, but he's had a lot of success at Wimbledon. The fact that the promising Andy Murray, the Brit who beat him last year, has called off sick for this tournament is a good thing for Roddick, who would have faced him in the quarters. But it sucks for him that he's in the same half

of the draw as Federer.

And what about fellow American James Blake? His career has been a bunch of peaks and valleys, and most of those valleys have taken place at majors. Last year, he had a 2-1 set lead over Max Mirnyi in the third round, but then flamed out inexplicably in the last two sets. Without a solid result here, he's going to be a serious candidate for Janet Jackson's school of "What Have You Done For Me Lately?"



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As far as questions go, the careers of the Williams sisters have been full of them. Such as, "Whatever happened to Venus?" Or, "Why doesn't Serena dominate tennis?" The sisters have often

found success at Wimbledon, with 5 titles between them. They're also playing doubles together again for the first time in a couple of years, which signals commitment. But their dad, Richard Williams has leaked that Serena has a hamstring injury. Plus, Venus looked shaky in her first round opener, having to struggle from a set and a break down to advance. Without her top game, which apparently is AWOL, the path will be really tough for Venus, who could face Maria Sharapova in the third round.

And if that matchup between the tour's best two shriekers happens, there's no question you'll need earplugs.

Nafari's tennis column runs Wednesday's in the Trib p.m. She can be contacted at nvanaski@tribweb.com.

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