



SUPPLIED

Raonic's rise provides a perfect opportunity for Canadian tennis



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SPORTS COMMENTARY

In a country almost exclusively focused on hockey and football, it's difficult to make a case to Canadians that tennis is a sport worth watching.

It could be chalked up as a product of time zones that force the biggest tournaments to be televised at inconvenient times — or maybe we've grown so accustomed to team sports that solo competitions seem less important. But most of all, I'd attribute it to the fact that Canada has never created a tennis superstar who's dominated on the world stage.

Over the past two years, Milos Raonic has risen in the international ranks from relative obscurity to the doorstep of the top 10. Born in the former Yugoslavia on the cusp of its dissolution, Raonic moved to Canada at an early age and began playing tennis at eight. At 6'5", his tremendous height would have given him an advantage in nearly any sport, so his decision to play tennis instead may seem surprising, though it likely speaks to his roots in Europe, where tennis is well-regarded.

Raonic's decision to compete under the Canadian banner speaks to his intention to raise the profile of tennis across the country, and if his performance continues to increase at the same pace, it shouldn't be long before Canada is represented regularly in men's tennis finals.

From there, the success would only encourage more young Canadians to take up tennis rather than more traditional Canadian sports.

For those wary of turning their attention towards Raonic or learning about tennis in general, Raonic's youth offers a perfect opportunity to learn about the game's more difficult aspects. While Raonic is already known for his extremely powerful and effective serving skills, which earn him easy points against the sport's best defensive players, his game still requires a great deal of work.

Last Sunday, the 2013 Australian Open came to a close. As the first Grand Slam tournament of the year, it sets the tone for a player's performance throughout the rest of the tour — and while Raonic's fourth-round match marks the farthest he's gotten in a Grand Slam tournament, his final match against Switzerland's Roger Federer brought out the kinks in the Canadian's game.

Federer certainly felt the wrath of Raonic's serve, but the Swiss maestro repeatedly beat him down when it came to volleying and playing close to the net. These more complex skills are only learned through time, which means those opting to start following Raonic can learn and grow with him as he works them out and ascends the ranks.

It's such technical complexities that mark what's so great about the game of tennis. Though the close-quarters, back-and-forth nature of the sport might not be appealing to some, few things are more intense than a smashed tennis ball repeatedly blurring across the court, as

both players grow more fatigued with every cross-court sprint. The individual nature of tennis also frequently forces physicality to take a back seat while the game turns into a psychological battle between opponents.

Unlike many team sports, tennis is certainly a sport where underdogs can achieve the impossible, and no outcome is certain until the last set is finished.

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As Raonic continues into the second month of the world tour, there are plenty of smaller tournaments to watch and mark his progress. With the second Grand Slam tournament on the horizon in May's French Open, we'll be able to watch Raonic go at it with tennis's best once again, also encouraging us to get more active as the summer months approach.

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