

## The Battle of France

by Robert Jamieson



**It was 7pm French time. The Australian Davis Cup Tennis Foundation Expeditionary Force, led by its commander Ian Jane from Bentleigh Travel, had survived a gruelling 27 hour flight to Paris and a five hour bus trip to our base in Nantes on the west coast of France. I had expected that the trip to Nantes would take us through quaint villages in the scenic French countryside but the French had used the same scorched earth tactic that the Russians used on Napoleon. We were faced with an unending freeway, covered in graffiti, fighting its way through endless flat, damp green paddocks. The only “village” we encountered en route was “Starbucks” cafe/ service centre.**

Nantes however exceeded our expectations as we set up headquarters at the Radisson Hotel, a grand former city court house overlooking the historic city square. We retired for the night to await tomorrow's battle feeling very much as the 300 Spartans must have felt at Thermopylae before their battle against the overwhelming Persian forces. We would do battle without our champion warrior, "Bernard the unready" who had pulled out with an injury, but, like King Leonidas before him, we knew that King Lleyton would fight to the death. We may not win the battle, but Todd had promised us that with the two Ks on board we had a good chance to win the war in years to come.

A one hour bus trip south to Mouilleron-le-Captif saw our small party arrive at the Stadium to do battle against the French hordes. The Fanatics were there to support us on the other side of the 4000 seat arena as Nick Kyrgios lined up against Richard Gasquet. The huge French cheer squad with their pale blue balloons were pitted against our yellow t-shirts and inflatable kangaroo. We won this battle however on the court it was another matter.

Kyrgios matched it with Gasquet throughout the first set and zoomed to a 3-1 lead in the tie-breaker. A series of brilliant backhand winners from the Frenchman however turned the tide and his consistency and accurate serving proved too much for the young Australian. Rafter tried hard to rally his charge but it was too late.

Australia however was clearly superior in one area ... The French ball kids were terrible! The highlight of the match was when play was held up waiting for one poor ball boy to retrieve a ball that went behind a microphone in the corner of the court. He could have left the ball but was determined to retrieve it. The microphone tumbled over and fell apart. The ball boy tried to pick it up and fix it, now forgetting about the lost ball. A cameraman came to help. A very red-faced ball boy finally restored order to his little corner of the court and play resumed after a huge round of applause from the crowd. He was for a moment the most famous ball boy in France.

The next match was Hewitt v Tsonga. Lleyton had been playing well recently so our hopes were high. Alas the French champion's powerful serve saw him breeze through the first two sets 6-3 and 6-2. Lleyton dug deep and took the third set to a tie-breaker but Tsonga prevailed. Our team leader commented on the bus journey home, "not the result we had hoped for, but perhaps the result that we had expected."

We returned to the Stadium for the day two doubles battle and were surprised to find another sell-out crowd. the French organisers had done well to rally their troops and proceedings commenced with a presentation to former French Davis Cup players. The French had also decided to go for the kill. They sacked their normal doubles team at the last minute and decided to play Tsonga and Gasquet. We however were not intimidated as Hewitt and Guccione had a great doubles record and had surely played together more often than the French pairing.



Play commenced but things immediately went bad. The Gooch lost his serve to love then Tsonga held to love and we were rapidly 0-3 down. The lady sitting behind me commented "yesterday I hoped that Australia may win a set .... today I am hoping that we win a point!" But then something strange happened, We started winning games, even breaking the awesome Tsonga serve, and the Aussies took the set 7-5. This trend

continued in the second set with Australia zooming to a 5-2 lead despite Lleyton being foot faulted at a controversial point.

Alas, the wheels then fell off and Australia lost a series of games to lose the set in a tie-breaker. Tsonga's serve was one long series of aces and Gasquet had rediscovered the rhythm on his backhand and was just hitting backhand winners on every point. Australia down 2-6 in the third set. We hung in there bravely in the fourth but at 5-6 Lleyton's serve was broken and Australia had quickly lost the set, the rubber and the tie.

Normally you would expect day 3 with two dead rubbers to be a bit of a let-down, however it did give us a chance to see the two Ks in operation against the second string French players and the stadium was still at least 90% full. Kokkinakis went on first and held his own for the first 6 games but then dropped off and lost 4-6 1-6. Next was Kyrios v Monfils which promised to be a closer encounter. It was a tight match, with Monfils enjoying the amusing chants of the Fanatics but the Frenchman just prevailed 7-6(5) 6-4.

The highlight of the day however was the appearance of a giant chicken dressed in French colours, which paraded around the arena then went to sit in the middle of the Fanatics. The French were great sports throughout the tie and made the Australians feel very welcome.

In the Davis Cup battle between our national tennis teams France was clearly the victor over Australia but as our tour around France continued there were other areas of interest to consider....

### Coffee

French coffee is terrible! Sure, it may be served in a trendy cup but it tastes like instant coffee and my skinny latte is topped by a few bubbles rather than centimetre of froth.

**Australia 1 v France 0**

### Bread

I love my Brumbys cape seed roll but the breads in France have so much variety and are so fresh.

**Australia 0 v France 1**

### Chocolate shops

There are some very good chocky shops in Melbourne such as the one in Maling Rd where I buy my breaky chocs or the one in Fitzroy Street St.Kilda but the boutique chocolate shops in France are great! Entering one is a feast for the eyes and a real adventure with new delights just around each corner, such as a wall of chocolate pizzas!

**Australia 0 v France 1**



## Restaurants

There is one trouble with French restaurants. They are all French restaurants! After two weeks in France I'd kill for a good pasta. They do however give you good servings. At one restaurant in Nantes I ordered the beef carpaccio and duly received my large plate of carpaccio with chips and a side salad. On finishing all this I was a little surprised to be asked "is Monsieur ready for his second plate of carpaccio?" I reluctantly ate the second serving but when they brought out a third plate it was too much! "Non! Finis" I blurted out in desperation.

**Australia 1 v France 0**

## Cars

In France every second car is not a four-wheel drive (thank heavens) as the roads are so narrow you could never pass a parked four-wheel drive. Amazingly our bus made it through these narrow streets which we all considered to be a modern miracle. Of course there are no trucks or vans allowed in the city unless they are like this one....

**Australia 0 v France 1**



## Forests

There are no forests in France. They were all cut down to build their ships centuries ago. Instead they have an occasional "wood" which consists of a number of small trees which strangely have no leaves. Instead they are covered in green moss. We longed for the Australian bush and the sight of a real tree!

**Australia 1 v France 0**



## Gardens

There are no gardens in France. All the spare land is planted with grape vines and there are no houses with gardens, only apartments 3 or 4 stories high. We did spot one plant nursery in our travels, but it had no customers.

**Australia 1 v France 0**

## Weather

There is some sun in France but it doesn't get up until about 8.30 am and it's back in bed by 4.30 pm so you have to be quick not to miss it. They don't have droughts but instead have constant floods so I guess we will have to score this one as a draw.

**Australia 0.5 v France 0.5**



## Cities

The French cities like Bordeaux and Nantes are amazingly beautiful. Imagine marvellous Melbourne in the 1890s with all the buildings of similar height and of the same architectural period. Add a few imposing statues and monuments and France wins this contest easily.

**Australia 0 v France 1**

## Sporting Facilities

How ever did they beat us in tennis? We saw one suburban tennis club in Saint-Emilion which had 4 courts and a small clubhouse and a couple of private courts but that was it. Maybe they hide their tennis courts indoors? Footy grounds? What's that? Any spare land is either planted with vines or under water, sometimes both.

**Australia 1 v France 0**

## Conclusion

So, on balance, it's a pretty close call, but there is a way that Australia can win! In the small town of Brive we spotted a shop which sells Nadals!



I thought we could buy a couple for our Davis Cup team or we may be able to trade a Nadal for a Tomic and offer to throw in his sister and his Dad to sweeten the deal. On second thoughts, that's probably not a very good deal for the French so we may have to start saving up our euros. I'm not sure what a Nadal costs but I'm pretty sure that Australian tennis would be prepared to pay the price.

Banishing the tennis from our minds our party then began a winery/food tour around central France before returning to Paris for the journey home.

## Here are some photos of the places that we visited.

Castle of Beynac  
Beaune  
Denoix Distillery  
Loire Valley from Domme  
Duke of Burgundy Coffin  
Eiffel Tower, Paris  
The two Magots Cafe, Paris  
Dijon  
Dinner, Hostellerie la Briqueterie

Saint-Emilion  
Nantes, Castle of Duke of Brittany  
Mouilleron-le-Captif  
Truffle hunting dog  
Wine tasting  
Hostellerie la Briqueterie  
Medieval House, Dijon  
Dinner, Le Chateau de Chailly  
Bridge statue in Paris





