

Murray's plight remains nearly but not quite

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My Andy Murray carbon footprint was beginning to bother me, so perhaps it's as well he failed to make the final of the US Open. At the weekend I was all set to fly to New York to see Murray doing his stuff at Flushing Meadows tonight, but alas, he lost to Rafael Nadal in the semis on Saturday.

I have flown to Melbourne twice in successive years to watch Murray lose in grand-slam finals; a long way to go for a total of six sets. But I was ready to do it again until Nadal left Murray wringing his hands and me ringing up the travel people to cancel flights.

It is a professional circumstance that leads to an oddly personal relationship with Murray. It's hard to be objective; after all, I find not just my travel plans but the rhythm of my life in the hands of a spiky-natured young Scot with no interest whatsoever in my comfort and peace of mind.

There is a consequent tendency to lose patience with Murray's shortcomings, to get exasperated when he is found to be anything less than perfect, to get resentful when he fails to match the greatest tennis players in history — players such as Nadal. Call this Sportswriter's Error. I have just turned up my testy,

accusing and almost despairing notes during Murray's previous grand-slam semi-final, when he lost to Nadal at Wimbledon after going a set up. It was the second set that got to me. I noted that Murray was "bossing game... out-hustling Nadal". Then after failing with a great opportunity to break "that was a chance..." Then as he presented us — me — with a double fault and then an "awful tight smash long... suicide tennis."

Murray didn't win another game in the set, only five more in the match. Ouch. So I wonder if I haven't occasionally been a little peevish in my judgments, sometimes inclined to

blame Murray for so nearly giving me one of the stories of a lifetime: British Player Wins Grand-Slam Tournament Shock... but he never quite does.

But the fact of the matter is that he has had a truly amazing year. He has reached the semi-finals of all four grand-slam tournaments, only the seventh player to have done so, plus that final in Australia. He is the fourth-best tennis player in the world. Who is the world's fourth-best footballer? Wayne Rooney? As in, very good, but not as good as Lionel Messi?

Murray is as good as Rooney, without question. And by any standards other than the one that he is

judged by and would wish to be judged by, Murray has had a marvellous year. There are four really terrific tennis players at the top of the men's game and Murray is in their number: fourth among unequals.

It seemed to me, as I took those notes at Wimbledon, that that brief passage of play, that less than ten minutes of personal disaster, summed up Murray as a nearly-but-not-quiter.

But I long to be proved wrong, to make that mad flight to the final once again or better still, merely to take the Tube to Southfields station and walk down Wimbledon Park Road — and write that story. Next year. Maybe.



● Here is another extraordinary image from Krystle Wright, the adventure photographer from Sydney. I am just back from Colombia, where I have been doing a bit of birding in the Andes, and

where I saw a bit of paragliding. Here Wright captures the same sport in the Himalayas in northern Pakistan: Hernan Pitocco, of Argentina, performing a wing-over in the Karakoram Range.

This was part of a month-long expedition in which Pitocco and two others set a record for a cross-country flight in Pakistan and the highest altitude attained this year.

Travel plans take a kicking

Some of my travel plans have been in the hands of Andy Murray; future plans are at the feet of Jonny Wilkinson. I aim to be travelling to New Zealand to watch England in the World Cup, so long, that is, as England are still taking part.

How extraordinary, then, to see Jonny missing all those kicks as England squeaked past Argentina. When in doubt, always turn to a *Times* columnist: Ben Youngs showed why by scoring the try that won the match. Wilkinson once had a reputation for an almost inhuman consistency as a kicker. Suddenly he looked desperately vulnerable. Perhaps inhuman accuracy is a wasting asset.

Wilkinson is not the type to cease from mental strife, and you fear for the punishment he will bring on himself after this series of lapses. I still expect to be seeing him in New Zealand, but maybe I'll wait a while before I start packing.

Torres is money down the pan

Fernando Torres always looks like one of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*, so it seems frightfully unfair to gloat over his misfortunes. But his slight frame and bewildered expression cannot hold back the vast wave of *schadenfreude* that follows him everywhere he goes.

He seems to sum up all that is most ghastly about Premier League football: money, greed, quick fixes, egomania, one-upmanship and just about everything that gets in the way of proper sport.

Bought on a rich man's whim and totally intimidated by the part he has been asked to play, Torres's failure at Chelsea has been the most perfect rebuke to the entire system of football by plutocracy. Money can't buy you happiness; it can't even buy you goals.

Flower's achievements match those of Woodward and Ramsey

This has been one of the most amazing periods in the history of English cricket. For their first trick, England became world champions in Twenty20 in May of last year. This summer they became the world's top Test nation. Now they are showing us that they have a half-decent one-day team as well.

In the newest and in the oldest forms of the game, England are top

dogs and now, in the 50-over game in which they have been lamentable for years, there are clear signs that, at the very least, England have a team that nobody laughs at. Triumph enough to be going on with.

This is a remarkable thing. Perhaps we should put it down as a triumph of coaching. Perhaps it is time to put Andy Flower on the same level as the coaches who have taken England

teams to triumph, Sir Alf Ramsey and Sir Clive Woodward, both of whom took teams to World Cups, football in 1966 and rugby union in 2003.

Flower's England team have beaten Australia home and away as well as everything else. First admire Flower's timing: this England team would not have achieved the same results against Australia of the Nineties nor West Indies of the Eighties. All the same,

this is a side of common purpose with egos that blend rather than clash, mostly players of the highest class of second class who have learnt to rely on each other and to take responsibility when their turn comes.

This is an extraordinary achievement and we haven't really started to appreciate it yet, preferring to be dismayed by the inadequacies of the opposition.

We don't judge cricket coaches and teams by World Cups alone, as we always have done in football and now do in rugby union. And we no longer see beating Australia as the ultimate achievement, for Australia are less than great at present. But let us look at this astonishingly consistent run of victories in all forms of cricket: a triumph on every level, not least that of coaching. Arise, Sir Andy.