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CONNORS DOWNS GOMEZ IN 5 SETS, GAINS ROUND OF 16

By NEIL AMDUR

Jimmy Connors woke up the United States Open tennis championships yesterday by winning a lively five-set marathon against Andres Gomez of Ecuador that went to a decisive tiebreaker.

The scores were 6-7, 6-3, 6-1, 4-6, 7-6, with an emotionally charged Connors taking the final playoff, 7 points to 5, and throwing his arms in the air as if he had just won the title. The match took 4 hours 23 minutes and both players left the stadium at the National Tennis Center troubled by cramps

"I dodged a bullet," said Connors, who had to break Gomez at 6-5 to send the match into the tiebreaker, then clinched it with an ace. His third-round triumph came at a time when his world ranking had slid to fourth and his ability to beat John McEnroe and Bjorn Borg for a major title hung in doubt. But after the tournament's first week of routine results among the seeded stars, Connors again proved that he is the sport's most exciting player.

Fate also seemed to hand him a reward for his effort when Mike Cahill of Memphis ousted 12th-seeded Johan Kriek, 6-4, 2-6, 6-1, 6-4. Cahill, who is Connors's opponent in the round of 16, is ranked only 189th.

The evening program, witnessed by 11,685, opened with an upset in women's play. Unseeded 17-year-old Barbara Gerkin of Thousand Oaks, Calif., defeated seventh-seeded Wendy Turnbull of Australia, 7-5, 6-3. In advancing to the round of 16, Miss Gerkin concentrated on keeping her shots deep to her opponent's forehand.

Several other unseeded players, including Andrea Leand and Rosie Casals, reached the last 16. Miss Leand, 17, who had upset Andrea Jaeger in three sets, showed she was not a one-match wonder with a 6-4, 6-3 victory over Julie Harrington.

Miss Casals, who will be 33 Sept. 16 and is only 140th in the rankings, won a serve-and-volley duel from Sherry Acker, 3-6, 6-1, 6-4, that put her into the last 16 here for the first time in four years.

"What's going on?" a friend asked an exhausted Miss Casals, after she had broken Miss Acker from deuce with a backhand cross-court pass and then held serve at 30 for the victory.

"Reincarnation," replied Miss Casals, who next faces third-seeded Tracy Austin. Connors's matches are like a ride on a roller coaster. Some have been fulfilling, such as Wimbledon 1974; others have been frustrating, such as setbacks in Open finals to Manuel Orantes and Guillermo Vilas. None are dull.

But in recent years, the ride has been rockier than usual for Connors -a fifth-set tiebreaker loss to McEnroe in the semifinals here last year and the five-set match he lost to Borg at Wimbledon earlier this summer after having been two sets up.

Connors could have closed out yesterday's match in four sets. But Gomez, a 20-year-old left-hander who said Connors had been his idol when he was 15, capitalized on an early break in the fourth set that neutralized his leg cramps.

At 6 feet 5 inches 190 pounds, Gomez has an imposing presence, even if his No. 50 ranking and season earnings (\$47,000) are modest alongside the sport's millionaires. His forehand can be a hammer, and when he runs around his backhand and hits the forehand from the doubles alleys for winners, it can be intimidating.

"He's obviously a good player," Connors said, dispelling notions that Gomez might have had a lucky afternoon. "I don't think you've seen too many forehands like that."

The fifth set had the crowd of 18,186 cheering both players. Gomez broke for 2-1 with a forehand service return down the line, only to have Connors attack and square the match at 3-all. They held to 5-all. Then Connors drove a backhand approach long and served a gameending double fault.

Inexperience kept Gomez from maintaining momentum. Serving for the match, he got to 30-all but allowed Connors to carry the offensive on second serves, as Connors rushed the net on 4 of the 6 points. A backhand lob by Gomez drifted wide and a forehand sailed long. With his emotions overflowing, Connors threw his arms high over his head and strutted for a towel, and the crowd roared with approval. Yet the match was not over.

Stoking himself up with clenched fists, wiggles, struts and raised arms is a Connors trademark under fire. "There's no better time to do it than a situation like that," he said.

Sometimes the ebullience has worked to his detriment in tiebreakers, particularly against Borg. But that is the only way he knows, and once he begins to believe that

he cannot regain No. 1, the intensity that fuels his game will fizzle, as it did earlier in the summer with some shoddy early-round losses.

Connors played the last tiebreaker aggressively. Gomez led briefly, 2-1, by serve-and-volleying the third point. But he netted a forehand, netted a backhand and then tried a forehand drop shot from in close, with Connors out of position, that spun into the net.

As he led, 5 points to 2, Connors began to be affected by hand cramps, and he served a double fault and drove a forehand wide. At 4-5, Gomez had two serves that could have given him the advantage. He lost the first on a stray backhand, after a shot by Connors had landed on the baseline. Asked afterward if the ball had been long, Gomez said, "Maybe I wanted it to be out."

Gomez saved one match point when Connors netted a backhand. But Connors went wide to the forehand with a first serve that caught Gomez leaning to the middle. Gomez thought the serve was out, but the linesman signaled good, that being only the second ace of the match for Connors.

"I felt happy with the way I played," Gomez said, calling it the best match of his career. For some reason, Connors seems to bring out the best in others.

Second-seeded Bjorn Borg easily handled David Carter of Australia, 6-2, 6-2, 6-2, but it was not a happy day for the Mayotte brothers, Tim and Chris, from Springfield, Mass. Tim lost to 16th-seeded Brian Gottfried in four sets, and Chris lost to ninth-seeded Roscoe Tanner, 7-6, 6-1, 6-2.