

KINGS

Behind the scenes with Team USA at Davis Cup

By **WAYNE COFFEY**

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

UNCASVILLE, Conn. — The world's oldest annual international sporting event came to a distinctly new-fangled location last week, on a 240-acre riverside reservation in the hills of southeastern Connecticut. In a town named for a 17th century chief (Sachem Uncas) and a casino named for a tribe (Mohegan Sun), five of the best tennis players in the country began competition for a trophy named for a Harvard tennis player (Dwight Davis).

Seeking its 32nd Davis Cup title, the U.S. took on Austria, a nation that has gone Cup-less forever. The Americans have never lost a first round at home and on a green hardcourt that resembled an oversized mouse pad, captain Patrick McEnroe's team of U.S. Open champion Andy Roddick, Robby Ginepri, Mardy Fish and Bob and Mike Bryan — twin brothers who are the No. 1 doubles team in the world — went in as heavy favorites.

The 104-year-old Davis Cup consists of four rounds over 11 months, 16 countries competing amid fierce pockets of patriotic fervor, as athletes in a normally individualistic sport meld into a team to play for their country. Like the Ryder Cup in golf, it has a wholly different feel from the weekly whirl of the tour — an event marked by boisterous behavior by fans and intense bonding by players, capped by a three-day crucible of international tennis.

The Americans lost to Croatia in the first round last year, and needed a heroic effort from Fish against Karol Kucera of Slovakia last fall to avoid falling out of the Davis Cup's top tier. They think they can win it all this year.

The Daily News was with the players in the locker room, on the practice court, at team dinners and in the lounge, a frat week with slots and high-powered serves. Here's a chronicle of the Davis Cup week that was, on the reservation:

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Roddick arrives and stumbles comically out of his limo. "I can make ballet physical," he says. He is in good spirits, despite losing his No. 1 ranking with his five-set loss to Marat Safin in the Australian Open quarters the week before. Spending Super Bowl Sunday with his girlfriend, Mandy Moore — and winning a Super Bowl pool — didn't hurt. The best American player of his generation may be surrounded by 300,000 feet of gaming space, but Tom and Pete Pistone, the North Bellmore, L.I., brothers and former New York City cops who ably handle team security, won't have to worry about pulling him off a craps table at 3 a.m.

"I don't even want to start. I don't trust myself. I'm too compulsive," Roddick says as he stretches in the locker room.

Mike Bryan, the righthanded half of the twins, saunters out of the U.S. locker room and greets Tom Pistone.

"How's your hip?" Pistone asks Bryan, who has a touch of arthritis.

"Fine, how's yours?" Bryan replies. Pistone had a hip replaced two years ago.

At the close of a 45-minute hitting session with team practice partner Robert Yim, Roddick turns his racket around, clutches the frame with two hands and takes some baseball swings at tennis balls, McEnroe doing the pitching. Roddick hits a few flares before cranking a ball into the

Andy Roddick leads Team USA in the Davis Cup but also finds time for a little fun. When they're not playing tennis on a court, the players enjoy the table-top version. Robby Ginepri (below l.) and Mardy Fish engage in a friendly game of Ping-Pong.



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