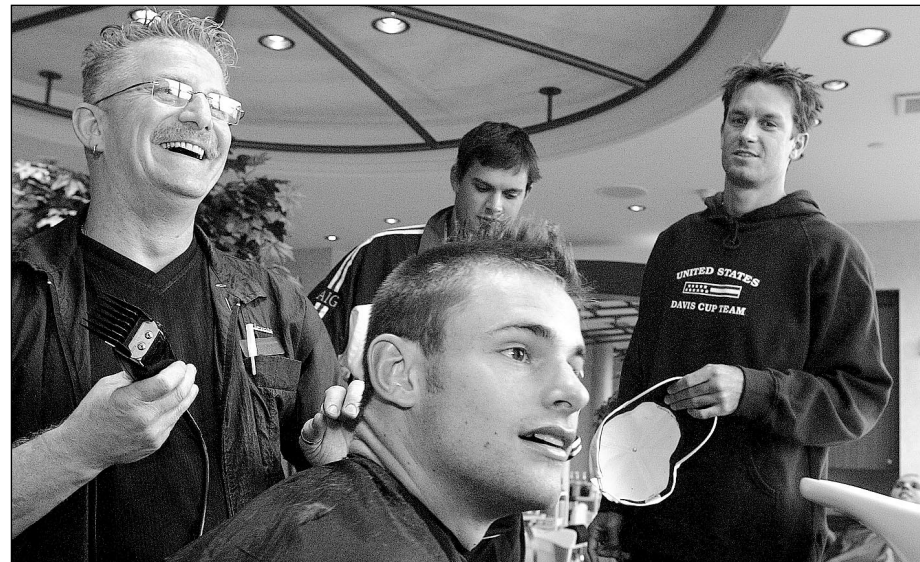


OF THE COURT



JOHN SPIVEY SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Andy Roddick (l) gets a few tips from Davis Cup coach Pat McEnroe this week. Team USA bonds before matches by going to barbershop for buzz cuts.

top deck of the arena.

Fish wins a set from Ginepri and by U.S. Davis Cup tradition, Ginepri must turn around and bend over while Fish gets three chances to hit him in the rear end with a serve. Fish misses the first two, but nails him with the third.

At the team dinner, McEnroe lifts a wine glass and says, "Here's to a great start and winning the whole thing this year."

A few guys hit the blackjack table after dinner. Ginepri loses \$600. "We all got crushed," Bob Bryan says.

WEDNESDAY

The team is staying on the 11th floor of the Mohegan Sun Hotel. A suite at the end of the hall serves as the team lounge and unofficial headquarters. It's stocked with food and beverages, PlayStations, televisions and a training table, where trainer Todd Snyder can give massages.

The players love Ping-Pong, so the USTA has had the table from the players' lounge at the National Tennis Center shipped in and set up in the hallway. "I feel sorry for the other people on the floor," Roddick says. He pauses. "OK, I'm over it."

McEnroe has chosen Ginepri over Fish to be the No. 2 singles player, despite Fish's slightly higher rank (21 vs. 25). McEnroe thinks this is a good time for Ginepri to make his debut. "I've been looking forward to this my whole career," Ginepri says.

In Room 1105, the team's racket stringer, Grant Morgan of Jay's Custom Stringing in New York, sets up his portable shop, a computerized desktop machine surrounded by spools of string, a slew of rackets and a lineup of paints and pliers. He will string about 15 rackets a day during Cup week. Roddick and Ginepri use polyester for the vertical strings, and gut across the center, 40 feet of string in all, calibrated at 63 pounds of tension. Morgan will have three rackets ready for Ginepri on Friday, and five for Roddick.

"Andy's tough on rackets, even when he's not throwing them," Morgan says.

Roddick pulled down Bob Bryan's pants in the U.S. Open player lobby last fall, and did the same to Mike Bryan outside the hotel in Slovakia later in September. The team is wary whenever Roddick is behind them.

Fish beats Mike Bryan in Ping-Pong, both grunting loudly with each swing of the paddle. "I got winner," Roddick says, as he heads off to do an ESPN interview.

At dinner at Michael Jordan's Steakhouse, Fish good-naturedly teases a waitress named Bonnie. "Are there any high school girls around here?" he asks. Roddick rubs Pete Pistone's bald dome, then tries to slip a half-lemon onto Fish's chair before he sits down. Fish catches him. "I was overanxious," a dismayed Roddick says, before the guys go off to play Pop-A-Shot in a video arcade.

A beefy guy in a brown blazer arrives seriously on the 11th floor and announces the Ping-Pong has to stop. Guests are complaining. The table gets folded up.

THURSDAY

Fish hits with McEnroe, and has Dr. David Dines, team physician, feeding him balls. It's a young team — the Bryans are 25, Fish 22, Roddick and Ginepri 21 — and everyone is healthy, so Dines, of the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, has happily not had any major injuries to diagnose. Fish rockets an ace. "That'll work," McEnroe says. Fish is handling sitting out gracefully. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to play, but I can work on my game, and it's still great to be here, with the guys."

In the lounge, Mike Bryan orders scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, English muffin and a side of oatmeal. He couldn't get to sleep until 3 a.m., his body still on West Coast time. Bob, the lefthanded Bryan, reports that he fell asleep at 11, no problem. "I'm screwed," Mike says. When McEnroe walks in, Roddick puts down a granola bar and stands up and claps loudly and says, "Captain McEnroe."

"All rise," McEnroe says. Roddick beats Ginepri in Ping-Pong, and gets a rug burn from a diving return.

The Bryans share a house in Camarillo, Calif. They also share a car, an E-mail address and a cell phone, after Mike left his on an airplane somewhere. They won the French Open last year and earned over \$1 million, though their specialty is largely overlooked in this country.

"Playing doubles in Davis Cup is as big

as it gets," Bob says. "We're going to be on ESPN. (Usually) we only play on the Tennis Channel."

On the way back from the official draw ceremony, the team is waiting by a service elevator when Roddick sneaks up behind McEnroe and yanks his warmup pants down to his ankles, a full moon revealed. The captain let his guard down and paid for it. Two female hotel employees giggle.

Roddick, Yim, the Bryans and Phil Farmer, the Bryans' coach, all get buzz cuts. Ginepri gets a half-inch cut off his long, tousled hair.

The Ping-Pong table is back. Everyone is happy.

FRIDAY

The Bryans have a band on the side, and Mike is delighted to see Chris Miller, their massage therapist, show up in the lounge with his guitar. He takes it out and strums a few chords. Four hours from his Davis Cup debut, Ginepri groggily makes his way into the lounge at 11:05 a.m. He has juice, fruit and French toast. Roddick checks out SportsCenter for the second time in an hour.

"Where would my life be without ESPN?" Roddick says.

He and Ginepri hit, then watch the film "Elf" to relax. In the locker room, the players put their hands in and Fish, fresh off a screening of "Miracle," the film about the 1980 Olympic hockey team, says, "Who do we play for?"

"U-S-A," they all shout.

In the tunnel of the darkened arena, moments before the U.S. team is introduced, Roddick says to Ginepri, "You're going to feel a rush of blood like you've never felt before."

After dropping the first two sets against Jurgen Melzer, Ginepri sits down on the changeover chair. "Have you ever come back from two sets down?" McEnroe asks. Ginepri says no. "You're about to find out what it's like," the captain says.

Ginepri wins going away, 6-2 in the fifth. He gets a hero's welcome in the locker room, knocked knuckles and raves all around.

"That was so inspiring, I want to go to

Iraq right now," Mike Bryan says.

"That was --- awesome," Roddick says as he goes to get stretched by Snyder.

In his seventh Davis Cup tie, Roddick, team graybeard, cranks a record 150 mph serve, and takes out Stefan Koubek in straight sets.

YESTERDAY

It is a sprawling, self-contained world in Mohegan Sun, and the guys haven't been outside in five days. "It doesn't bother me. We have a big window," Fish says, eating a bagel in the lounge.

The Bryans have a morning hit with Patrick McEnroe and their coach, Phil Farmer.

McEnroe does a live WFAN spot with Chris Russo, in a place called the Wolf Den, a little amphitheater in the middle of the casino. Framed by slot machines, a big-screen video of wolves and the hum of gaming, McEnroe talks Davis Cup and big-time tennis. A fan comes up to McEnroe and says, "Nice pick with Ginepri."

"Thank you," the captain says.

Alone with Farmer in the locker room, Bob and Mike Bryan change into their U.S. uniforms — red striped shirts and blue shorts — and begin locking in for the second Davis Cup match of their lives, this against Melzer and Julian Knowle.

"The emotion is so high now," Mike says. "You live and die with every point out there."

The Bryans win in straight sets, do their signature leaping chest bump and take a flag-waving lap around the court with Ginepri and Roddick. In the locker room, USTA boss Arlen Kantarian congratulates everyone on a job well done. "If you need me (today) I'll be on the sidelines drinking a margarita," Mike tells McEnroe.

The official team dinner is at night in the arena. Both teams, coaches and assorted tennis honchos are invited. After a rousing, if expected, triumph, the frat boys have put down the Ping-Pong paddles and rackets and are all dressed up in their designer suits. They are in the quarterfinals, against Sweden. They will gather again in April, without the casino, but with each other. Life is good.