

Tennis

Bold Leconte swept aside by a Mats for all surfaces

David Irvine in Paris

It is perhaps an apt comment on their contrasting sense of priorities, as well as their ability (or otherwise) to play their best tennis when it matters most, that Mats Wilander, who has never been ranked No.1 in the world, now holds as many Grand Slam titles as Ivan Lendl, the world champion since 1985.

Yesterday the 23-year-old Swede claimed his sixth major singles championship, and his third on the red clay of the Roland Garros stadium in Paris, when he cut the charging Henri Leconte's challenge to ribbons by 7-5, 6-2, 6-1 in the most one-sided final since his distinguished compatriot, Bjorn Borg, annihilated Vitas Gerulaitis in 1980.

Wilander, a quiet and self-effacing man who has never been fully appreciated by British audiences — his best Wimbledon performance was to reach the quarter-finals last year — is nevertheless the only player yet to win major championships on red clay, grass and synthetic surfaces.

But heading the computer, a favourite topic of Lendl's, has never bothered Wilander. When he said as much, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors were appalled, but his views have not changed.

"It's always been more important to me to win the big events; that's what really counts," he said. "To get to No.1 you have to win almost every tournament you play, and that's not my style any more. But now I've won two Grand Slams in a year for the first time, so the next step has to be the US Open and Wimbledon."

Indeed Wilander is now halfway to completing the first Grand Slam since Rod Laver in 1969. "But that's still a dream," he admitted, "although I have

to recognise that the chance is there."

Many wondered if his superb five-set victory over Pat Cash in the final of the Australian Open at the new Flinders Park stadium in January indicated that he had changed his game too much to maintain his supremacy on clay.

But Wilander, whose closest call came when he met Slobodan Zivojinovic, gave an emphatic answer to such speculation by resisting Leconte's first-set challenge before overwhelming him.

"I was a bit worried when he served for the first set at 5-4," said Wilander, "but not, I feel, as much as he was. When I won the first set that was it. After that he was far too tense."

This showed in a French flood of backhand errors, while his own passing shots, hit with deadly accuracy from either side, were never better.

A low-level pass by the Patrouille de France, the Gallic equivalent of the Red Arrows, celebrated 100 years since the birth of Roland Garros and brought a sense of anticipation to the occasion which Leconte whipped to a climax as he broke Wilander to love at 4-4.

But the journey from climax to anticlimax was swift. Wilander broke back, took the set and proceeded to make Leconte look as out of place in a final as Steffi Graf had done to Natalia Zvereva 24 hours earlier.

Wilander said that although he was aware that Leconte was not regarded with the same hero-worship as Yannick Noah, he was surprised that the crowd "were not really there when he needed them most."

Jean Borotra, who will be 90 in August, and his 87-year-old fellow musketeer René Lacoste, the losing finalist when the stadium was first used 60 years ago, presented Wilander with the trophy and the winner's cheque for £150,000.



Master Wilander . . . after his straight-sets win in Paris