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Le petit Rochus fires up crowd

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PARIS -- It was like playing *Name That Tune* against a deaf opponent. Early in the second set Thursday afternoon, **Marat Safin** hit a well-disguised dropshot against **Olivier**

Rochus, his second-round opponent. Rochus charged in and pushed the ball back to Safin's backhand. Taking a step to his left, Safin short-hopped the ball and hit a sadistic lob. As a semi-smile of resignation formed on his face, Rochus didn't even turn around as the ball spun over his head and landed within two feet of the baseline.

So it goes for the 5-foot-5 Rochus, the smallest player on the men's tour since ... since whom? Other diminutive players like **Sebastien Grosjean** (a winner Thursday over **James Blake**), **Michael Chang** and **Cecil Mamiit** look like **Shaq** next to Rochus. ATP guru **Weller Evans** recalls a player named **Claude England** from New Zealand (or was it Claude New Zealand from England?) who played in the early '80s and was roughly Rochus' height. But whereas Rochus is a quality pro, England never attained a ranking within shouting distance of the top 100. **Harold Solomon**, a finalist here in 1976, was another name recalled by the cognoscenti in the press room. But Solomon goes 5-7. And besides, we're already talking 25 years ago.

What Rochus is doing is simply remarkable. Size may not be a prereq for success on the men's tour -- see: **Hewitt**, **Lleyton** -- but a player who's giving away upwards of a foot and 50 pounds to his opponent is at a disadvantage that verges on insurmountable. Rochus played five sets of tennis against heavy-serving Safin and hit a grand total of zero aces and one service winner. Hard to win many matches with stats like those. Yet there the Belgian was, rousing the crowd on while making a credible bid to pull off the biggest upset of the tournament so far. And this week was no fluke. Already this year, Rochus, 21, has won nearly \$200,000, cracked the top 60 and reached his second career final, February in Copenhagen.

Fortunately for Rochus, he has manifold gifts to compensate for his size (ergo, power) differential. He might have the best set of wheels this side of Hewitt, he returns well, he plays at a variety of speeds, and his touch is, as countryman **Xavier Malisse** puts it, "sick." Safin's assessment after three hours of up-close-and-personal viewing: "He's small but he doesn't look like he's running almost. He has great anticipation, great touch, great hands. He's a very talented guy. Me? I'm big. I have power but I don't have touch."



Rochus' game is born of both design and accident. By age five, he was the smallest kid in his class, a distinction he never would lose. He also was the smallest kid in his family: His "big" brother, **Christophe**, also an ATP pro, is five centimeters taller; younger brother **Pierre**, who is studying to be a lawyer, is the tallest of the three. Rochus took an instant liking to tennis, but quickly realized he was not destined for a career as a power player. "I knew early that I would have to be a fighter and build the points," he says. "I never thought I would be a big hitter one day, so I always worked on my strengths."

How, one only imagines, would Rochus have fared as a player were he to partner his gifts and innate talent with a few more inches on his frame? Don't ask him. "I don't think about it," he says, "because if I am taller, maybe I wouldn't move so well or react to the ball like I do. I don't ever think about my height."

Others can't help it. Rochus' height -- as well as his clever, cunning game -- make him an instant crowd favorite. When he whipped a series of shots past Safin to take a two-sets-to-one lead, he was the **Napoleon** of Court **Suzanne Lenglen**, 3,500 fans shouting his name in unison. Though he was positioned on the other side of the net, Safin may have been the biggest admirer in the stadium. "I was amazed at the way he played today and the way he fought," Safin said afterward. "I think he's a great, great player."

In the end, Safin pounced on a few innocuous second serves to break Rochus in the fourth and fifth sets. He closed out the match, appropriately enough, with a diving stab volley. "For me, the match was a pleasure," Safin said. "I think it was a great match, high quality."

Yes, the littlest man to hit pro tennis in decades came up short. But it sure wasn't by much.

Half volleys

Juan Carlos Ferrero, the 11th seed, turned his right ankle in practice Wednesday. He decided against withdrawing from his match Thursday against Frenchman **Nicolas Coutelot** and survived in five sets. ... From the Bad Analogy Dept.: Coutelot was, inexplicably, livid about the rumors that Ferrero would withdraw. "Now I'm angry," Coutelot said, "and I say those who made this stupid lie, it's like you said **bin Laden** was dead. It's not true." ... **Vince Spadea** joined **Andre Agassi** as the only American men to survive two rounds. The former top-20 player (Spadea's motto: *From 20 to 200 in 12 months*) saved a match point and beat streaky **Adrian Panatta** 8-6 in the fifth set. ... For the second time in three Slams, Malisse took out **Tim Henman**. ... Agassi dropped the first set against Spaniard **David Sánchez** but won in three sets. How? Sánchez retired with a "blister injury," as it was called. ... A darkhorse to watch on the men's side: **Guillermo Coria**. ... **Serena Williams** announced that she was wearing knee-high socks in honor of the Cameroon World Cup team. Who is her favorite soccer player? "**Cobi Johnson**."

Sports Illustrated senior writer *Jon Wertheim* is in Paris covering the French Open and will file regular reports from Roland Garros. [Click](#)

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