

The Comeback Kids: Stopping Stanford's Streak Turns Around Men's Tennis

The Cal men's tennis team lost its second match of the season on February 8 to No. 27 Indiana State at the National team indoors in Louisville, Ky. At the time, the Bears were ranked No. 11 in the nation, and had been invited to the national event for the first time since 1992. Coach Peter Wright saw this as an opportunity to show the country that his team, while young, was one that could compete for the national title.

Instead, the 2-0 Bears entered the three-day tournament with two straight losses. First up, Cal was defeated by No. 6 Illinois, 4-1, followed by the heartbreaking 4-3 loss to Indiana State the next day.

"We talked about how indoor tennis wasn't our strength," said Wright of the loss. "It was early in the season, the loss wasn't the end of the world, and it wasn't time to push the panic button."

Even though Cal closed out the tournament with a 4-2 win over No. 52 Brown University, the damage had been done. The Bears were shown up on the national stage, and their ranking dropped seven spots to No. 18. The team's record dropped to .500 a week later, when Cal was beat up on by No. 9 Pepperdine the next week, losing 4-2 in Malibu.

What followed was perhaps the greatest turnaround in team history.

First, Cal returned to Berkeley, and beat up on No. 49 San Diego, winning all the points for a 7-0 victory. With the record standing at 4-2 and a tenuous hold on the No. 17 national ranking, the Bears were forced to travel to Stanford to challenge the Cardinal. Never mind that the arch-rival Stanford squad hadn't lost a match at Taube Tennis Center since 1996, a streak of 75 consecutive victories. Never mind that the Cardinal was the ITA's 3rd-ranked team. Never mind that in 2001, the Bears only scored two points the entire season against the team from the farm, or that Cal hadn't beaten the Cardinal since 1991, 21 consecutive victories.

"No one beats Cal 22 times in a row," deadpanned Wright.

Down 3-0 in singles play, the Bears once again had their backs to the wall. Freshman Mik Ledvonova was the first Cal player to break the ice for the squad, taking a 7-5, 6-0 victory for the team's first point. Three singles matches went to their third sets. On court one, Fruttero broke the serve of the ITA's No. 1 ranked player, K.J. Hippensteel to tie the set at 4, the rode out the final two games for the victory. Wayne Wong finished up on court three, tying the match score at three apiece, before Robert Kowalczyk's match came down to a tiebreaker. After jumping out 6-0, Kowalczyk let Stanford's Sam Warburg back in the match, dropping four straight points. On his final serve, Kowalczyk took the needed seventh point, giving Cal the victory.

"Everything validated itself after the Stanford win," said Wright. "It was an eye-opener for the guys on the team who weren't convinced that we were as good as we thought. For the guys who knew how good we were, they weren't all that surprised."

The match was the second win in a streak of ten, which lasted for nearly six weeks. The Bears won their next seven matches by a combined score of 44-5. Despite ending Stanford's streak, Cal still was not on the national radar screen. When the new computer rankings came out following a 6-1 victory over SMU, the Bears' 6th consecutive, Cal dropped from No. 11 to No. 20, and wouldn't crack the teens again until mid-April.

What resurrected the Bears' national ranking was a match that held greater historical significance to Cal than even the Stanford victory. On April 5, the Bears took their act on the road to Los Angeles. After getting

(MORE)

Feature of the Week
Add 1

blown off the court in doubles, the match once again came down to a singles set, with the score tied at 3 per team. This time, the team captain, Fruttero had the chance to be the hero. Fruttero, whose No. 22 national ranking matched that of his team, came through in high style, upsetting tenth-ranked Tobias Clemens in straight sets, 7-6, 6-4 for Cal's tenth-straight win, and the Bears first victory in Los Angeles in nearly 50 years.

The streak was ended the next day by USC in a hard-fought 4-3 loss. The Bears, however had a chance to make up for it with the Stanford rematch, set originally for April 9, then pushed back one day due to a rain delay.

Once again, Stanford took the doubles point, giving them an early edge before the capacity crowd at Hellman Tennis Center. Once again, Cal's backs were to the wall, going down 3-1 with three matches left to play. Once again, it was Ledvonova who got things turned around. After yet another comeback, all eyes fell to Fruttero and Hippensteel, in the battle of the team's No. 1 players, at the top court. Fruttero, up 4-1, was not able to hold on, however, and the match ended in a 4-3 decision, a Stanford victory.

Despite the loss, the Bears had shown the world that they could play with anybody on the main stage.

"Going down early 3-1 again and being able to come back really shows that we have a lot of heart," Fruttero said. "Our team has come a long way."

"It was an NCAA (tournament) caliber match," said Wright following the match. "Our guys came out, they played their hearts out and we improved as a team. We don't feel down after the match."

The Bears proved themselves again the next week, this time, not needing dramatic comebacks. Cal completed the near-impossible task of sweeping three of the ITA's top 15 teams at Hellman Tennis Center in convincing fashion. The 19th-ranked squad opened the week by utterly demolishing the visiting Pepperdine Waves, 6-1, to avenge February's loss. Fruttero redeemed himself with a 7-6, 6-0 victory of the nation's top-ranked player in Al Garland. Cal would then systematically dismantle No. 13 USC (5-1) and No. 2 UCLA (5-2) that weekend to close out their season in a team-defining three-game winning streak.

"Those wins give us a lot of momentum heading into the NCAA tournament," said Wright of the victories. "Everyone is firing on the right cylinders right now. It's a good thing for us as a team."

Closing out the season with an 18-6 record gives Cal their best winning percentage (.750) of all time (minimum 18 matches). The 5-2 Pacific-10 record and subsequent second place finish is the Bears' best. The final week also offered Bear fans something it hadn't seen since the 1953: wins over UCLA, USC and Stanford for the first time in the same season. 1953 was also the same season that the Bears last swept the Bruins. That squad, incidentally, finished as the NCAA runner-ups.

"This team has the potential to go to the semifinals, the finals, and even win the NCAA Championship," said Wright. "We've seen that potential. We've seen the ability."

Cal has a tough road ahead as it enters the NCAA Tournament this weekend as the 10th-seed, with a No. 10 national ranking. Assuming all goes as expected, the Bears will be facing the Blue Devils in the second round of the tournament. Duke is ranked No. 17 in the nation with a 15-11 record, and a perfect (8-0) conference record. No. 13 Fruttero will have to take down No. 11 Phillip King (18-5) to put a score on the board.

While it's not an upset, the Bears once again will have to show the nation that they can play with anybody.

"This is the best team I've ever coached," proclaimed Wright.

####