

The moment David Talbot dived for the ball, he knew he'd made a terrible mistake.

The former world number one had done this diving volley countless times. His imposing six-foot-three figure gave him an impressive reach and nearly guaranteed he got to the ball every time.

But not this time. Not this time.

Fate was a cruel mistress. After having fought a titanic comeback over the past three-and-a-half hours to force a deciding fifth set, Dave's luck had finally run out.

He'd come into the '94 US Open Final as the underdog, having seen off home favorite Sampras in the semi-final. Four years since his last Grand Slam final: an eternity in tennis years, and a graveyard for most careers. The world had written him off as yet another prodigy who'd inevitably crashed and burned under the bright lights and relentless pressure, another golden child who succumbed to the allure of drugs and drink.

And yet here he was anyway. The press was salivating at the prospect of an all-American Sampras/Dvorak final, but as always, Dave refused to follow the script. It was just like the old days: the two bitter adversaries, Talbot and Dvorak, fighting like gladiators.

Three years in a row, Dave had sent Tomas Dvorak home empty-handed from the Wimbledon final, which was the only major title missing from the Czech-American's glittering career. And in '89, Dvorak had memorably humiliated Dave in a straight-sets victory in the French Open semi-final, which finished with the Australian breaking his racket and storming off the court. (Ask Dave about it now, and he'll tell you that clay was never his strong suit anyway.)

Needless to say, there was no love lost between the two. So it only seemed fitting that they settled their bitter rivalry here on neutral ground— well, as neutral as it could be, considering that it was Tomas' adopted home.

That night, Australian fans turned out in their thousands at Flushing Meadows to support their man, chanting "*Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi, oi, oi!*" with relentless enthusiasm despite the sweltering weather. The crowd was positively rabid, louder than Dave ever remembered, and the umpire's repeated pleas for silence fell on deaf ears.

Tomas Dvorak stood on the other end of the court, bouncing the ball up and down as he waited for the umpire to silence the crowd. Eventually a *shhhhhh* passed through the crowd and the umpire, rightly so, figured that this was as quiet as they were going to be. Tomas dipped his fingers into his pocket for sawdust.

“Match point, Dvorak.”

Dave twirled his racket between his sweat-soaked hands. There was nothing the liquid chalk could do to improve his grip on this devilishly humid night. After three-and-a-half hours of play, everything fucking *hurt*. Dried blood was caked onto a cut on his right knee, a prize for his earlier diving volley, and he could feel his thighs starting to tremble as he crouched to receive the serve.

He was familiar with this pain, as all professional athletes were. He’d learned, long ago, to not pay attention to it, to banish it to the peripheries of his mind as he did the crowd’s roar and the never-ending volley of camera flashes. He was only twenty-six, but his body felt decades older, ravaged by the demands of his sport and his intense playing style.

If Dave looked like he’d just run a triathlon, Tomas looked like he was enjoying a leisurely Sunday at the country club, with barely a hair out of place. It fucking infuriated Dave, really, how Tomas made everything seem so effortless, so methodical, so *robotic*.

Tomas bounced the ball again and again. *Come on, umpire. Do you see this shit? Where’s the fucking shot clock when you need it?*

Dave snarled. He was sure Tomas gave a smirk back. Rage narrowed his vision.

Then it came. The toss. The swing. The flat, vicious serve made the ball cut through the air like a missile.

He followed the ball instinctively, but before his feet even left the ground, Dave knew he’d misjudged the distance. He wasn’t as quick or agile as he used to be, but he’d be damned if he was going to lose to Tomas *fucking* Dvorak.

The ball grazed the tip of Dave’s racket and bounced over the net, but he didn’t pay attention to that.

A howl escaped his mouth the moment he crashed back down to the ground. He’d heard the sickening *snap* in his wrist, felt the white-hot pain shooting up his arm. He was sure he was screaming a flurry of curses in-between pleas of “help me,” but he didn’t remember any of it.

There was nothing except the pain that hijacked all his senses. The crowd’s roar had been drowned out, replaced by the thunder of his own heartbeat. Adrenaline took over and Dave instinctively tried to scramble back to his feet, only for his legs to immediately give out from

under him. The court started spinning around him and he looked down at his wrist to see it had swollen to twice its usual size.

*Oh, fuck.*

Dave looked back up to see himself clutching his wrist on the big screen, trying to confirm if everyone else saw the nightmare that he was having. But there was nowhere for him to hide from the glare of the cameras, from the millions of people watching the worst moment of his life from the comfort of their television screens.

*Don't look. Please, don't look.* He felt the sting of tears in his eyes, and it took every last ounce of Dave's strength to fight them back.

After what seemed like an eternity, the tournament's physio materialized by Dave's side with a basic first-aid kit that was bound to be inadequate. He said a whole lot of words, but Dave didn't have the capacity to listen.

"Dave. David." He snapped back to attention as the man shook him by the shoulders. "It looks broken. You'll have to go to the hospital."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Dave. I really think you need to stop. It's bad."

There was a brief pause as Dave tried to process the news. Eventually, the only thing he could say was: "No."

"No? What do you mean, no? You can't even hold your racket, man!"

Reality started to hit Dave like a bullet between the eyes. "I have to win this, mate. Don't you understand?" He wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or the physio. "Just tape it. Tape it." He was begging as if the physio had the power to magically cure him. "You can't force me to stop. I know the rules. Just fucking tape it!"

The trainer sighed as he rummaged in his kit for the tape that wasn't going to help at all. "You've got three minutes. After that, it's up to you, but I'm not going to let you go on like this." The analgesic gel and the pack of ice did absolutely nothing to staunch the waves of pain that came over and over again.

But Dave was used to pain, see? He was used to it. It was fine.

He looked up to hear the crowd's chants: "Davey, Davey, Davey!" At that volume, they could probably be heard from Manhattan.

They used to cheer him on like that, at Wimbledon and back home in Melbourne, but that was a lifetime ago. Dave knew what they were expecting from him, and to retire with a whimper would be the biggest disappointment of his career.

"I can play." Fuelled by nothing but adrenaline, Dave tried to get to his feet before the trainer was even done taping his throbbing wrist. The physio's protests fell on deaf ears as the tennis player scooped up his racket, ignoring the pain that shot up his arm as he did so. "Tell the umpire."

He trudged to the baseline, although his vision was swimming and he grimaced and winced with every movement. Tomas was still smirking, he was sure of it, although he couldn't see his opponent properly.

"I'm not finished," he muttered. *This is who Davey fucking Talbot is. Let them see.*

The trainer and the umpire exchanged tense words, before the umpire shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Match point, Dvorak. Talbot to serve."

Dave gritted his teeth. He'd been here countless times before. The ball came out of his pocket and he tossed it in the air.

Too high. He knew it. He swung anyway.

The pain was immediate, sharp, blinding. There was nothing he could do. The racket fell from Dave's hand and clattered uselessly to the ground.

He froze for a moment, then slumped forward on his knees, clutching his wrist in sheer agony. Somehow, somewhere, he heard the umpire speak.

"Default— player unable to continue. Game, set, match, Dvorak."

There was nothing but stunned silence in the stadium. Dave couldn't hold back the tears anymore. And that was how his career ended: not with a bang, but dead silence.