



Tired Tomic showing his age

Tim Leslie

Updated Fri 22 Jan 2010, 11:26pm AEDT

A paediatric sleep specialist has backed Bernard Tomic's claims he was unfairly disadvantaged in his first round Australian Open loss.

Tomic raised the ire of the ATF and ITP after blaming his five-set loss to Marin Cilic on the fact the match did not finish until after 2.00am AEDT, saying it was "ridiculous" a 17-year-old would be playing that late.

Tomic was ordered to meet with Open director Craig Tiley, tournament referee Wayne McKewen, plus a grand slam supervisor and ATP Tour manager following the completion of his first-round men's doubles match tonight.

Tiley said it should have been an honour to play at Rod Laver Arena and Tomic's churlish reaction had upset his peers.

"There's going to be players who spend their whole professional careers never playing on Rod Laver, so they're all fighting to get that prime-time opportunity," he said.

But Dr Chris Seton, a paediatrician in the sleep investigation unit at the



PHOTO: Sleep-deprived: Tomic said it was ridiculous to be playing so late

AUDIO: Interview: Bernard Tomic (ABC News)

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Children's Hospital at Westmead, says as a 17-year-old, Tomic is far more affected by sleep deprivation than an adult player.

"Medically speaking, and when you look at sleep physiology, he's absolutely right, because a 17-year-old playing at two o'clock in the morning is a whole lot more tired than even a 19-year-old or an older person," he said.

"Now that's because teenagers are more affected by sleep loss, so if you say everyone playing tennis at two o'clock in the morning at that level will be more tired than at nine o'clock in the morning, that's true, but he would be more tired in general as a 17-year-old, and he would be a whole lot more tired.

"When you think about the science of it, he's actually correct, and at that level of tennis and elite sport a little bit of compromise between one player and the opponent can mean a big difference in the outcome.

"So you couldn't say scientifically that he couldn't have won, but you would say scientifically he has a very valid point and a point that's been proven medically. It's not a debatable point."

'Severe disadvantage'

Dr Seton says while many people believe teenagers need less sleep as they get older, the average 17-year-old needs as much sleep as a 10-year-old.

"Babies at birth need a lot of sleep and as they get older they need less and less sleep, and the perception is as you go through puberty in your teenage years you need less and less sleep," he said.

"But when you measure the physiology, there is no difference in sleep requirement from age 10 to age 17; that is, the curve is flat.

"So although kids vary from one to the other, whatever Bernard Tomic needs in terms of sleep at age 10 he needs at age 17."

Dr Seton also emphasised the difference in sleep needs between a 17-year-old and a 19-year-old.

"Now there's even a big difference between what [Tomic] is like now and what he's going to be like aged 19, because at age 19 he will have pretty much an adult sleep requirement," he said.

"So [over] the next two years his sleep requirement from the 17th to the 19th birthday basically goes from a kids' level to an adult level.

"Now the thing is, if the two people competing are the same age, or they're both beyond 19 years of age - say if they're both in their 20s, one of them is not at a disadvantage compared to the other, so it's still a sort of fair playing field.

"But when one of them is 17 and the other one is older than 19, the 17-year-old has a severe disadvantage."

'He's just got to play when they tell him'

Dr Seton said one option to solve the problem would be for Australian Open organisers to not schedule late-night matches for players who were under 19.

"The science behind it says that he is at a disadvantage at two o'clock in the morning, now whether anyone acts on that is up to them," he said.

"From a personal point of view I think it would be nice if Tennis Australia said, 'look, until you're 19 years old in a tournament, because you might be at a disadvantage at two o'clock in the morning we will schedule things so that you're not playing at two o'clock in the morning'.

"The nice thing about that is it would even up the playing field a bit.

"The alternative to that would be Bernard Tomic and his coach can go, 'well scientifically we know we're at a disadvantage playing at two o'clock in the morning and we know might get scheduled after midnight so until we're 19 we're not going to play in these tournaments'."

But Grandstand commentator Quentin Hull says while he sympathises with Tomic, players in the Open must be subject to the same conditions.

"Ostensibly he's just got to be treated as anyone else in the draw, whether he's 17 or not, [or] then you'll get senior players who are in their mid 30s wanting special treatment as well," he said.

"That being said I suppose he does have a point - he is 17 years of age - and if he wants to explain a part of his performance, well of course he's allowed to use the time as a factor explaining part of his performance; it's like any number of other factors in sport."

Hull says younger players need to learn to accept late-night matches as part of the challenge of playing in an open tournament.

"When you're playing an open competition, you've got to basically play when they tell you to play and when all of your opponents have to play," he said.

"Teenagers in tennis just have to accept these things and it is unfortunately a part of the learning process to play whenever and whoever in all circumstances."

Topics: tennis, sport, australian-open, melbourne-3000, australia, vic

First posted Fri 22 Jan 2010, 5:18pm AEDT

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