

A very Victorian team (left to right):
Wayne Arthurs, Paul Hanley,
Chris Guccione, Peter Luczak
and John Fitzgerald.

A NEW VICTORIAN ERA

Every member of the Australian team that beat Switzerland in the first round had something in common: a close association with the state of Victoria.

BY PATRICK MILES

THE VICTORIOUS AUSTRALIAN DAVIS Cup team that returned from the upset win over Switzerland in February has given the national squad a distinctly Victorian taste, one which is likely to become the flavour of choice in coming ties.

It seems that captain John Fitzgerald – himself a long-time resident of Melbourne – will not have to cast his Davis Cup net too wide to produce a team worthy of adding its name to Australia's rich history in the revered team event. All four members of the team that defeated the Swiss 3-2 in Geneva are Melbourne-raised and domiciled.

Chris Guccione, who sealed the first-round result in the fifth rubber, is Melbourne born and bred, Peter Luczak moved there from Poland as a young child, Wayne Arthurs, although born in Adelaide, calls Melbourne one of his homes and Paul Hanley grew up in the northern suburb of Preston.

The shape of Australia's future is the "Big V", so what more suitable venue than Kooyong, the spiritual home of tennis in Victoria, to take on Belarus.

"It would be fantastic to play in the quarter-final in Melbourne, my home town, with all my family and friends to support me," Guccione says. "I've played at Kooyong once, in the Kooyong Classic. I played Rainer Schuettler, but don't have fond memories as I lost badly. Hopefully, if I get on there again I can do a bit better."

Luczak can afford to be a bit more misty-eyed about his past visit to Kooyong and the potential for more.

"It would be magnificent," he says. "The first time I went to the Australian Open, it was at Kooyong. My dad took me, and I was only about four or five. I remember a match between Helena Sukova and Martina Navratilova, although I don't remember who



Arthurs (left) and Hanley talk tactics during their victory in the doubles rubber against Switzerland.



Australian captain Fitzgerald (right) encourages Luczak during his first rubber win in Geneva.

"Obviously, it is nice to have other Melburnians and Victorians there ... It's also good when you're in Melbourne, you've got a lot of people to train with and you become a lot closer to them." Chris Guccione

won. It was fantastic. I remember my sister got really mad because I got out of school and she didn't."

Making the most of his opportunities is the key now for Luczak.

"The last tie (in Geneva) was my first live rubber. I think it is probably easier to play away because the expectations are not as high and if you lose, you don't feel as though you are letting as many people down," he says.

"There is added pressure at home; you feel like you are playing for everyone. There would be much more pressure, but it would be an unbelievable experience."

Such is Luczak's laid-back nature that he was happy to confess he had not noticed the Victorian element in the squad.

"I didn't even realise we were all from Victoria, but it might help because we've got stuff in common, like we all follow footy instead of rugby," he said.

The fact that the squad contains a quartet

of Melburnians will not be lost on Lleyton Hewitt, whose passion for his home-town team, the Adelaide Crows, is as intense as his own performances on a court.

The dressing-room talk for this quarter-final will not just include tips on how to tame Max Mirnyi, it will also revolve around the weekend's AFL action, when Guccione's Cats take on the Kangaroos, Luczak's beloved Bombers visit Brisbane and the Crows host the Eagles on Sunday afternoon.

"Obviously, it is nice to have other Melburnians and Victorians there," Guccione said. "It's good to talk about footy. There is always a bit of footy talk, and it's always good to have the other guys who like footy, not rugby, so you can talk about it."

"It's also good when you're in Melbourne, you've got a lot of people to train with and you become a lot closer to them."

Exposure to Australian football has given these tennis players a benchmark where



Luczak leads the field during Davis Cup training in the sandhills at Rye.

fitness and dedication are concerned, if the example of Hewitt is anything by which to judge. Like Pat Cash, the greatest Davis Cup Victorian of the modern era, Hewitt's upbringing was steeped in footy.

Both Cash and Hewitt Snrs played Australian Rules at the highest level and their sons have continued their affinity with the sport. Now the likes of Guccione and Luczak are attacking their work with the fervour usually associated with a body-contact, team

Tennis Masters Cup last season, celebrated their first Cup match together with a four-set win, giving the visitors a 2-1 lead. After Luczak lost a close fourth rubber to Stanislas Wawrinka, it was left to Guccione to rescue the tie for Australia.

But it was the attitude of the players away from the heat of battle that garnered them praise from their camp and the locals alike.

Their work ethic, on the practice court and in the hotel gym, and their courteous

Guccione had slipped under the radar – no mean feat for a redhead who is two metres tall; and, as a Geelong supporter, "Gooch" can identify with dashing redheads.

But having close compatriots on the tour has its drawbacks, as well, particularly for a man as affable as Luczak.

"It is always tough to play your mates," he said. "I always had trouble playing Scott Draper. His brother Mark coached us both and we travelled together for two years. Although you want to be competitive, you still want to be a good bloke."

While Luczak has made his way to the Davis Cup squad via Warsaw and California, where he excelled in tennis at Fresno State College, Guccione is a product of the Australian Institute of Sport's tennis program in Melbourne. Luczak took the more winding road but it suited his ambitions.

"I did college tennis in the States for four years, then came back to Australia and played Futures, Satellites, Challengers in 2001," he said. "I loved it; it was perfect for me. I wasn't a top junior, so it gave me a chance to improve my tennis, and get mentally and physically stronger."

"It's a big jump from juniors to seniors.

"I didn't even realise we were all from Victoria, but it might help because we've got stuff in common, like we all follow footy instead of rugby." Peter Luczak

sport. Such is the nature of Davis Cup, which allows the solitary players their chance to become one part of a machine.

Luczak was nothing less than formidable in the opening rubber of the first-round tie in Geneva, defeating Michael Lammer 1-6 6-3 6-0 6-3 with a devastating blend of strength and placement. On the middle day, Arthurs and Hanley, the experienced left-right combination that reached the doubles

manner brought admirers and friends, just as their exploits in competition gave hope to Australians, who previously had most of their eggs in the Hewitt basket.

Following Guccione's three-set demolition of George Bastl, the captain and various other astute onlookers experienced visions of the tall left-hander plying his wares to great profit on the grass at Wimbledon.

Fitzgerald claimed that the 20-year-old

Melbourne's Guccione celebrates his tie-winning victory in the fifth rubber against Switzerland's George Bastl.



You're still young kids, especially guys, so for me it (college tennis) worked out perfectly, and gave me another four years to work on my game."

Fitzgerald's radar observation aside, Guccione did create a blip in 2003 when he reached the singles and doubles finals of the Wimbledon juniors.

The doubles combination of Hanley and his left-handed partner Arthurs has brought some much-needed experience and well-honed craft to the squad. Under the guidance of Todd Woodbridge, the pair has made its contribution quickly, particularly Arthurs, who made his cup debut in 1999.

"He brings a lot of experience to the team," Guccione said of his 35-year-old teammate. "He has played a lot of Davis Cup and Paul, although he hasn't played a lot of Davis Cup, he brings a lot of knowledge of the game, and the doubles court, when he comes into the team."

If there is one thing that Australian tennis players understand perfectly, it is that bonds can be as valuable as abilities when it comes to national duty. And some well-placed footy talk doesn't hurt, either. ●

PATRICK MILES COVERS TENNIS FOR THE AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPER.