In-form Kazakhs to rattle our boys

AUSTRALIAN Davis Cup captain Wally Masur said the team has to be wary of Kazakhstan ahead of their tie in Darwin this weekend.

Masur described the Kazakh's Davis Cup form – which has seen them make the quarter-finals in four of the past five years – as “phenomenal.”

He said their first round 3-2 win over Italy “showed us how good they are” and “set off alarm bells.”

“Obviously we’re talking players on the ATP tour that have had significant results,” he said.

“We’re under no illusion about how difficult this tie is going to be.

“The Davis Cup is a slightly different competition – players tend to really enjoy the atmosphere and lift – and it certainly seems as though the Kazakh team falls into that category. Their results in (the) Davis Cup have been phenomenal.”

“Mikhail Kukushkin and Aleksandr Nedosyanoi played really well so form is really important, but for me it’s as much about their respect for this competition and their attitude that is going to make them really, really tough.”

The Kazakhs have been in Darwin for 10 days already, while the Aussies have only arrived in the past few days – Nick Kyrgios only arrived on Monday.

Lleyton Hewitt – competing in his 16th Davis Cup – said Kazakhstan No.1 Mikhail Kukushkin held the key for the visitors.

He said despite playing on their preferred surface, the Aussies were not taking anything for granted.

“Our form Mikhail Kukushkin is their go-to guy – the way he handles himself in big Davis Cup matches is something he should be really proud of.

“He’s got his team over the line numerous times in big matches, including the first round against Italy so we’re expecting them to come out firing and play well.”

Young gun Thanasi Kokkinakis said he was looking forward to extending his grass court season, and is now waiting for the draw to be announced.

“No one knows who’s going to play on what day yet, we’ve just got to wait – we’re training well so hopefully we can keep it up and we’re looking forward to the tie.”

“Excited – I arrived yesterday and I’ve had a couple of good hits so I’m feeling good.”

Aussie Nick Kyrgios after a hit-out with Lleyton Hewitt yesterday

Kyrgios will headline an outfit in Darwin also featuring Lleyton Hewitt, Thanasi Kokkinakis and Sam Groth.

During yesterday’s media conference in Darwin, Kyrgios was asked if his recent controversies – including a turbulent Wimbledon campaign where he was accused of tanking in London – had made him a liability.

Masur quickly defended him.

“Nick a liability for the Davis Cup? Absolutely not,” Masur said. “He’s here, he’s got the green and gold on, he’s one hell of a tennis player.

“That doesn’t make him a liability, it actually makes him the spearhead.”

Tomic was axed from Davis Cup duties after accusing TA of abandoning him after he had hip surgery last year.

The world No.25 also claimed that Rafter had no idea how to control the budget for player funding and was merely a “mask” for chief executive Craig Tiley.

The rift took a twist on Monday when TA distributed an email listing Tomic as having an upcoming appearance at the “Hall of Shame Tennis Championships.”

TA insist the matter was no more than a typo, and that the email should have read “Hall of Fame Tennis Championships.”

Tomic and his dad are exploring their legal options over the issue.

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Aussie star Thanasi Kokkinakis during a practice session at the Marrara courts in Darwin yesterday as preparations for the Davis Cup tie against Kazakhstan continue

Ranks now brimming with brats

AUSTRALIAN tennis once was full of good news stories, and personalities to match.

Rod Laver, the only male player to twice win all four Grand Slam tournaments in the same calendar year – in 1962 and 1969 – and leading women’s major winner Margaret Court were in that category.

Other exemplary role models and multiple major winners include Evonne Goolagong Cawley, Ken Rosewall, John Newcombe and Pat Rafter.

Two-time Grand Slam champion Lleyton Hewitt, a Davis Cup stalwart who had an often difficult time with his on-court demeanour, has emerged recently as a more eloquent elder statesman during his move toward retirement.

Even during dry spells in Davis Cup play and in men’s majors over the past decade, players have mostly been respectful.

So where, seemingly, has it all gone wrong?

At Wimbledon, 20-year-old Nick Kyrgios battled with umpires time and again, was acussing of tanking and swore so loudly and abused his rackets so violently that he was fined nearly $10,000.

Just when that media skirmish was settling, 22-year-old Bernard Tomic renewed his ongoing messy dispute with Rafter, who now is Tennis Australia’s performance director, and directly criticised other Australian officials.

On Monday, as if the sport in Australia needed another controversy, Tennis Australia sent out a list of upcoming matches for Australians overseas, and it noted that Tomic had a first-round match at the “Hall of Shame” tournament in Newport, Rhode Island.

That was supposed to be the Hall of Fame tournament, and Tennis Australia quickly sent a correction and an apology.

Meanwhile, Tomic’s woes continue after he suffered a shock first-round defeat to fellow countryman John-Patrick Smith in Newport.

The world No.25 lost 6-3 7-5 in only 70 minutes to the 156th-ranked Smith.