

Ginepri surprised himself with his play last season.

Back to The Grind

Patience and hard work put Robby Ginepri in the Top 20 last year. How high can they take him in 2006?

Reality shows have been made with Venus and Serena Williams and Andy Roddick. But where's the drama? If TV's hit makers are searching for a compelling story, they should check out the last year in the life of Robby Ginepri.

Counted as one of the fresh American faces ready to follow Roddick into the upper echelons of the game two years ago, Ginepri shot up to No. 25 in early 2004 and made the U.S. Davis Cup team.

Then his game unraveled. He kept losing matches and was dropped by his clothing sponsor, Nike. At Wimbledon in 2005, the fleet-footed Georgian lost in the first round at his fourth straight major, sending his ranking tumbling outside the Top 100. Ginepri was on the verge of becoming a has-been who never was.

"He hit rock bottom," says his coach, Francisco Montana.

"Slipping to 103 was a good reality check for me," says Ginepri, whose early success weakened his work ethic and, ultimately, his enjoyment of the sport. "I got up to 25 and I thought it was pretty easy. I was like, 'Wow, this isn't too hard.' I didn't work as much and was taking every day for granted. It came back to haunt me."

While Ginepri refocused, even he didn't foresee how quickly he would recover. After Wimbledon, the 23-year-old had a strong summer that included his first win over Roddick, his first Masters Series semifinal, in Cincinnati, and his

second ATP title, in Indianapolis. Then came his semifinal run at the U.S. Open and a strong fall that pushed him to a career-high No. 16.

"I thought the process was going to take a lot longer," Ginepri says. "I was hoping it would click by the end of the year, but by the end of the summer, everything seemed to be falling in place."

"He's a workhorse. [He] finally woke up and smelled the coffee—that he has to play... that grinding type of tennis," U.S. Davis Cup captain Patrick McEnroe says.

If Ginepri continues to be solid, he could become a staple on the team. Montana certainly likes what he sees. A former pro, he's helped the laid-back Ginepri get into the gym and onto the practice court with new intensity—no matter what his mood—and has preached a patient style of play. Ginepri already had explosive speed and shot-making ability, but sometimes, Montana says, he took the offensive too early.

"His patience has increased tenfold," Montana says. "And he's not forcing the issue."

Off court, Ginepri is also more settled, having moved past his fling with British actress Minnie Driver. He's now in a relationship with a woman he knew in high school. And he has signed with clothing company Under Armour, though he hasn't abandoned his signature sleeveless look.

"I'm definitely on the right track," Ginepri says.

— DOUGLAS ROBSON

