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Andre Agassi

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Andre Agassi
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If you were fortunate enough to see Andre Agassi's match with Marcos Baghdatis on Thursday night/Friday morning at the U.S. Open, you saw one of the great moments in modern tennis, at a tournament that over the past decades has offered many memorable matches and moments. Facing retirement, Agassi is playing one final tournament at what has become his triumphant home.

Thursday's tennis spectacle had everything. Baghdatis, a twenty-one year old rising star of the game, was playing his boyhood idol. Agassi, racked with back pain and having taken the needle in order to be able to walk onto the court, was playing what was potentially the last match of his illustrious career. The crowd, nearly 24,000 at center court, was near hysteria much of the night.

Agassi won the first two sets and Baghdatis won the third set 6-3. Then in the fourth Agassi took the crowd to new heights as he opened the set winning four straight games while breaking Baghdatis twice. The roars on Agassi's winning points were deafening.

Then in a reversal Baghdatis lifted his game and ran off four straight games en route to what turned into a 7-5 win. The crowd sat in disbelief and began to desperately cheer for an Agassi recovery. The tension built in the fifth set and at 4-4, and 30-30, Baghdatis hit a winner. Suddenly he was seized by cramps, hobbled, and fell to the ground. After struggling to stand and move, the game resumed, and in one of those eerie moments Agassi was unable to win the game until after eight deuces thus prolonging the crowd's and Baghdatis' agony.

After getting some treatment at the changeover, Baghdatis held serve in another surreal game, but in the end he couldn't recover and lost the final set 7-5 in the midst of a crowd lustily cheering Andre Agassi. It took nearly four hours for the drama to play out and by the end everyone was exhausted. If this turns out to be Agassi's last match, and it could be if his back does not respond to the next visit from the needle, that would be a fitting end to this amazing career.

And what a career it has been. In one of the first Sport and Society pieces I wrote, exactly 15 years ago today, September 2,

1991, I commented on the rising star who had not yet won a grand slam event but was still the darling of tennis. His wardrobe drew more comment than did his on court performance. At that time, for Agassi, winning seemed beside the point. Marketing, not winning, seemed to be the only thing. Commercialized sport had no greater exposition of its crass character than the marketing of Andre Agassi displaying, as it did, all that is wrong with modern sport. The triumph of style over substance seemed destined to kill sport, or at least take the heart out of it. The contrast that year with the midnight madness displayed by Jimmy Connors was stunning as Agassi went out ignominiously in the first round.

Agassi was the spoiled brat of modern tennis. He defied the dress codes, refused to play Wimbledon, saying he couldn't bear the traditions of the stuffy English tournament, especially the all-white clothing requirement. He belittled reporters when they asked what he thought were stupid questions. He was a public relations disaster.

But by 1995 a new Agassi had appeared, one who fought for every point, who was dedicated to and focused on the game. He went to Wimbledon in 1992 and won his first grand slam event. In the finals at the U.S. Open in 1995, Agassi was defending champion and lost to Pete Sampras in a four set final in what turned out to be one of many amazing matches between these two great players. Clearly Agassi had reached his full potential as a tennis player and matured as human being. He was on his way to becoming one of the great professional tennis players of our time.

Since then Agassi has had one of the great careers in the history of tennis. He has won eight Grand Slam events and is one of only five players to have won all four Grand Slam events. He is the only current active player to have done so. He has become one of the ambassadors of the game and has invested in the future of tennis and the young with his tennis academy in Las Vegas. His conditioning regime has allowed him to continue to play at a very high level and has often been the difference between himself and much younger players.

In many ways his greatest match took place in the quarterfinals of the U. S. Open in 2005. It was reminiscent of the aforementioned 1991 Jimmy Connor's victory in the first round against Patrick McEnroe that ended in the early morning hours. McEnroe had won the first two sets from Connors, and at age 38 Connors looked ticketed for an early exit. Then something

happened and Connors began an amazing comeback winning the next three sets.

Agassi's victory in the quarterfinals against James Blake came with Agassi in the twilight of his career. Like Connors, Agassi lost the first two sets and roared back to take the next three. Like the earlier match this one started on one calendar day and ended on the next. Agassi's victory came at 1:19 a.m., while Connors' victory had come at 1:30 a.m.

There were also differences. The third set was a titanic struggle between Agassi and Blake, with Blake missing an opportunity to win the match serving at 5-4 and having Andre down 15-40. Blake couldn't close the deal and ultimately Agassi prevailed in the tiebreaker. Agassi had never come back from two sets down in a Grand Slam event. The crowd was roaring as it had been in 1991 for Connors, but this time it was roaring for the performance of both competitors in one of those memorable matches that the U.S. Open seems to serve up in the wee hours of the morning.

Thursday night's match is likely to be remembered as one of the most dramatic of Agassi's career, but the 1995 match with Blake surpassed even it. But then the drama of the circumstances was clearly higher as this match ended Friday morning with Agassi's pain laced triumph.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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