

Wimbledon

7-2-2013

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Wimbledon" (2013). *On Sport and Society*. 10.
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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
July 2, 2013

It has been some time since I have watched an entire tennis match. In point of fact my interest has drifted away from the sport. Somehow Wimbledon calls me back. The setting and tradition play a role, as does the fact that it is the only grand slam tournament I have ever seen in person.

This year it appeared that I would not return to watch the action from this unique tournament played on grass and drenched in strawberries, cream, and too much rain. During the first week of the tournament I was in New Jersey at the 30th Sport Literature Conference, an event of some note in its own right. So I didn't see the quick exit of Rafael Nadal in the first round, or Roger Federer and Maria Sharapova in the second round. These three big names were gone and Wimbledon lost some of its great players and its luster.

I did however hear some of the flap over the graceless comments of Serena Williams concerning Maria Sharapova, and her idiotic references to the victims of rape in the Steubenville high school case. Why athletes feel a need to weigh in on such matters remains a mystery, especially when no one asks for their opinion. No one asks because no one is ignorant enough to think that their opinions on these matters is worth knowing. Serena Williams apparently felt her views could offer guidance to the world.

So much for week one of the "fortnight," a Wimbledon word worthy of The All England Club where they play the Ladies and the Gentleman's Tennis Championships. Going into week two I was yet to see any of the play except for a few highlights.

Then Monday morning after staggering out of bed I turned on my television to check the temperature and see if there would be a 50% or 70% change of rain. It was 80 percent. By some strange coincidence the television came on to ESPN where I saw Serena William playing someone called Sabine Lisicki, and Serena was getting hammered in the first set. Well that got my attention and then my interest.

If Nadal, Federer and Sharapova could go out in week one, why not Serena Williams at the beginning of week two? I quickly dismissed that idea, and as I expected Williams

came back and pounded Lisicki in the second set, 6-1. I left the TV on, but my attention was divided between the match and my Post Toasties. When Williams won the first three games of the third set, at that point eight straight games, it appeared the match was about to become a rollover. Had I been near the remote I would have turned it off.

Then things changed. Over the next seven games Williams was able to win only one. Repeatedly Williams had Lisicki down in a game, in one at 0-40, but each time Lisicki produced the big serve, the hard angled forehand, or a delicate drop shot. When Williams was forced to come to the net, she looked like an ordinary tour player. Then as Lisicki closed the gap and drew even Williams began to show nerves, an uncharacteristic response from a player who generally just takes her game up a notch when in trouble and regains control of the match. At times, for a few points, it looked like this might happen, but each time Lisicki struck back.

I found myself drawn into this match and giving it my undivided attention. I then found myself pulling for the upset and marveling at the shot making of this young German player. I admit that I had never heard of her before Monday morning, even though she had earned a reputation as a giant killer at previous Wimbledon Ladies Championships, and reached the semis last year. Watching her and then hearing more about her from the television reporters, it was clear that grass is her surface.

It turned out to be a remarkable and extremely entertaining third set. It also revealed that Chris Evert, who was the ESPN analyst in this match, is very good in her new job. She has the analytical skills, voice, and vocabulary of a pro and rivals Mary Carillo, albeit without the sharp wit and cynicism.

When the match ended there was a sense of disbelief at what had just happened, and immediately there was speculation about the road ahead for Lisicki. The last four players who defeated Williams in a grand slam lost in their next match. The emotional let down would certainly be a factor. So this morning I took my Post Toasties to the TV and watched Sabine Lisicki try to defy the odds again. She did. She didn't play at the same level as she did on Monday, but she didn't need to because Serena Williams was no longer on the other side of the net. She won her match in straight sets

and was seldom in any trouble. Next will be the semi-finals and perhaps a chance at the championship on Saturday.

NBC used to call Saturday morning's finals, Breakfast at Wimbledon. Now we can have breakfast at Wimbledon every morning of the fortnight except for the middle Sunday. I'll be there with my Post Toasties once again, and hope to see Sabine Lisicki there as well.

As for Serena Williams, she will need to work on her net game before the next Wimbledon. At the end of August she will be back pounding on her opponents at the U.S. Open. Let's hope she has learned one other thing. She needs to avoid snarky gossip and a desire of offer social commentary and stick with the tennis. That after all is what she does better than anyone ever has.

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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