

Murray

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The words monumental, epic, unforgettable, and historic are thrown around with reckless abandon in our hyperbolic age that specializes in over-inflating the reality of mundane events. As a historian I am especially wary of the term "historic," when describing a sports event. In the universe of high frequency television commentators, all of these words suffer from overuse.

When a tennis match is won in straight sets it seems unlikely that these any of these words would be appropriate. In the case of the Gentlemen's Singles Final on Sunday at The All England Lawn Tennis Club any or all of these words might apply. Certainly it was historic. Andy Murray became the first British player to win the Gentlemen's Singles title in seventy-seven years. The last to do so was the great Fred Perry in 1936.

I can't say that I remember Fred Perry as a player, but I do remember him as a tennis commentator on television in the heyday of televised tennis in the 1970s. He was a good one, combining knowledge of the game with analytical skills and the ability to communicate to a television audience. For some reason I always remember one of his favorite points of instruction to tennis players: "When you get a player down, don't let him up, keep your foot on his neck." This of course is good advice in tennis, in most sports, and perhaps beyond the arena as well. It is easier said than done as Andy Murray learned today when Novak Djokovic repeatedly got up after Murray had him down.

Every year at Wimbledon Fred Perry is resurrected if only to inform the audience that he was the last British man to win a title there. British tennis fans needed no reminder of this burdensome fact. They carried it with them to the All England Club every year in early summer.

As I remember it the historic drought was mentioned in 70s and 80s but only became an obsession during the career of Tim Henman. He seemed for many to have the necessary tennis talent to break this streak of futility. In the end it was not to be. Although a very good player, he was unable to win a Wimbledon title and in fact never reached a Wimbledon Final.

"Henman Hill" was given its name during the high point of Tim Henman's career in the late 90s when fans that did not have prime seating tickets gathered on the hill to watch the matches on a big screen TV placed just behind what was then Centre Court. The biggest crowds appeared there during Henman's matches, as he carried the burden of British hopes for a men's championship. The name "Henman Hill" stuck, although in recent days some have suggested it might change to reflect Andy Murray's rise to the top of British tennis. "Mount Murray" is only a slight improvement on the truly lame "Murray Mound."

Today's straight set victory by Andy Murray over Novak Djokovic, 6-4, 7-5, 6-4, certainly qualifies as historic. It was in many ways epic, as well. The match had several dramatic swings, long rallies, and took place during the hottest day of this summer in London. At many points, even with Murray on the verge of victory, it seemed as though Djokovic was in control of the match, and that it was Murray who was on the brink of defeat. Murray was down 4-1 in the second set and rallied to win. Then in the third set Djokovic rallied from behind and Murray faced multiple break points that could have led to a Djokovic winner. Even in the final game when Murray was one point from the title at 40-0, Djokovic roared back and before the game and match ended Murray had to save three more break points.

It was an agonizing match for the British fans and all those around the globe hoping to see Andy Murray achieve what had eluded him a year ago against Roger Federer. As the final few points were played the crowd was primed to explode and after a few false starts it did. It was epic and historic and a pleasure to watch.

It was also a fitting end to the fortnight. The early exit of Nadal, Federer, and Sharapova signaled that this was no ordinary Wimbledon. The dramatic defeat of Serena Williams by Sabine Lisicki and the equally dramatic Lisicki win in the Ladies semifinal match were a prelude to Maria Bartoli's dominating finals victory. Bartoli did not lose a set during her Wimbledon fortnight.

In terms of high quality tennis, the Gentlemen's semifinal match equaled or even exceeded the final. Novak Djokovic and Juan Martin del Potro produced five sets of high quality tennis in the longest match by time in Wimbledon history.

It was nice to see tennis being played at this level on what is its biggest stage. I feel certain that Fred Perry would have enjoyed it, and would have been the first to congratulate Andy Murray on his achievement, even if at times Murray took his foot off of Djokovic's neck.

Breakfast at Wimbledon never tasted better even without the strawberries and cream.

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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