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Tennis

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Nearly every year the U.S. Open Tennis Championships seem to offer some remarkable match, a stunning upset, or tennis at an extremely high level. This year it showcased all three.

Another peculiarity is that some of the wildest and best tennis arrives between midnight and 1:30 a.m. This year was no exception. Last Saturday night Raphael Nadal was up against Fabio Fagnini of Italy the number 32 seed. It looked like another easy walk in the park for Nadal especially after he won the first two sets of the match. Then things began to change as Fabio played fabulous tennis over the next couple of hours. The two men hammered away at each other but in the points that counted the edge went to the Italian. It was the first time Nadal has ever been beaten after winning the first two sets of a match.

It was high drama and tremendous tennis that kept the crowd screaming and kept people in the eastern and central time zones from going to bed. It was riveting tennis, meaning I was riveted to the couch and the television screen.

There may be something about the U.S. Open that makes for those midnight specials. In 1991 I wrote the second of these "Sport and Society" pieces about the memorable quarterfinal match that went well past midnight and was settled in a fifth set tie-breaker. Jimmy Connor's at age 39 defeated Aaron Krickstein in a match that had the crowd repeatedly screaming and on its feet. The 2001 quarterfinal between Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi had another post midnight finish and went four sets with each decided by a tie-breaker. Sampras at age 30 bested Agassi at age 31 in a match that was in many ways Agassi's greatest. I thought of these battles over and over again as Nadal and Fagnini pounded away. It was one of those nights, and there would be more like it. In the next round Fabio went quietly in straight sets.

Clearly the biggest story of this U.S. Open was Serena Williams' quest for the Grand Slam of tennis which no one had done since Steffi Graf in 1988. Serena could tie Graf for most grand slam singles titles by taking the U.S. Open. Of course Williams has twice won four Grand Slam events

consecutively adding a new phrase to the tennis vocabulary, the Serena Slam.

The Grand Slam was not to be and it brings forward any number of clichéd comments about sport, and they are cliché's because they contain some core of essential truth. "Titles are not won on paper;" "Records are made to be broken;" "On any given day." And there are many more. They were all activated in the Women's semi-final when the top seed and seemingly invincible Williams played the unseeded Roberta Vinci.

It started according to script as Williams won the first set with relative ease. The two had played four previous matches and Williams won all of them and indeed had never lost a set to Vinci. It would be a simple thing to say that Serena lost the match because she suffered from nerves and tightened up. There is some truth to that analysis but it does not tell the story of some really high level tennis played by Vinci who used all her shots and developed a game plan as the match progressed. By the middle of the second set it was clear that Vinci was often controlling points and dictating pace. The variety of shots and being run all over the court by some fabulous shot making was taking its toll on Williams. In the end she cracked.

Vinci won the last two sets by the scores of 6-4, 6-4. It was a display of tremendous willpower as she would not fold even when she got down in a set, and she was 0-2 in both the second and third set. It was mesmerizing to watch and see Vinci almost toying with Williams with steady shot making while waiting for Williams to make a mistake.

The longer this went on the frustration level was building in Williams. On easy put-away shots Serena over-hit, blasting her shots both long and wide. Vinci just kept on running and returning and making shots, some of which were composed of equal parts of guile and finesse. In the end it was a thing of beauty to watch, even though I had hoped Williams would achieve her quest. Before it was all over I had changed my position and did not want to see a performance like this one go unrewarded. It did not. History was not made by the player who came to the U.S. Open to make it.

Surely this was not going to be equaled in the finals, men's or women's, and it was not. Nevertheless the men's

final produced a gritty heavyweight tussle between Roger Federer, who seems to get better with each passing year, and Novak Djokovic, clearly the best player of the past few years.

It was an exciting match with an abundance of drama, but almost all of that drama ended with Djokovic winning an important point or a big set, saving a break or achieving a break. Federer played extremely well and perhaps as well as he can play at his age. In the end it was not enough for him to win, but it was enough to produce some more quality tennis and nail biting moments for anyone watching.

If you were luckily enough to see any of this tennis you know what great tennis is, and you know that whatever some may have thought this is still a great game featuring great athletes. Tennis is not dead. It is very much alive and we are all lucky to have seen greatness on display once again at the U.S. Open.

As Mike Lupica said on Sunday morning in reference to the Vinci-Williams match, "this is why we watch the games. This is why we love sport."

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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