

6-7-1999

Tennis

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Tennis" (1999). *On Sport and Society*. 136.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/136>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
JUNE 7, 1999

What ever happened to tennis, "The Sport of the Seventies?" It was all the rage. The names of the great players were known universally: King, Court, Evert, McEnroe, Borg, Ashe and Connors. After every big television tennis weekend you couldn't get a court in a public park without a two-hour wait. If you played in the big private venues, well you might be able to get a court at 2 a.m. on Wednesday or Thursday, but you couldn't expect much else.

TV ratings for tennis skyrocketed. Networks vied for rights to the grand slam tournaments and the big ATP events. Sponsors were falling all over themselves to buy commercial time on the network telecasts in order to reach that upscale demographic group who would buy imported beer and luxury cars. Tennis was the sport of the yuppies and would be yuppies.

As for the manufactures of tennis equipment and clothing they couldn't produce their products fast enough. There was even a short time in the Seventies when there was a tennis ball shortage. The factories that produced the balls for all the distributors were working around the clock at one hundred percent of capacity and they couldn't keep up with demand. There were places across America where the shelves that displayed tennis balls were empty.

And all of this was before cable, before 24-hour sports networks, before the nation had been saturated with sports. Tennis was dubbed the sport of the future, and the future was now. Scott and Tammy were enrolled in tennis lessons at the club, and the shoe manufacturers were gearing up for their lucrative ride on the desire for the winning edge. The tennis parent became a cultural icon to rival the Little League parent.

Yes, those were great days, and until this weekend I thought they were gone. Tennis got lost somewhere in the Eighties or early Nineties buried by the X-Games or the Triathlon.

Women's tennis went through a minor revival in the last few years, but basically the larger public and much of the sporting public lost interest. Perhaps it was over-exposure; perhaps it was the passing of a fad, perhaps it was the brat factor. Whatever it was, interest dropped and television ratings followed.

Then this weekend, as I always do with the Grand Slam Events, I tuned in to see what is happening in tennis these days. Much to my surprise a great deal is happening.

The French Open brought with it two weeks of excellent tennis and highly competitive matches. It also brought many of the clay court specialists to the fore. In the biggest surprise of all it produced two twenty-nine year old champions, in this sport that seems to specialize in teenagers who win before they should even be competing.

Steffi Graf, only a few days from her thirtieth birthday, completed a comeback from major injury and the emotional turmoil of her father's tax and legal problems that landed him in prison for fifteen months. Peter Graf was in the crowd to watch his daughter for the first time in five years.

The beauty of Graf's victory for many in the crowd was that she beat the eighteen year old sensation Martina Hingis who has shown a remarkable ability to say the wrong thing and lose her temper on the court. Hingis was taunted and booed by the pro-Graf French fans and by most accounts deserved every bit of hostility the French sent her way. By the end Hingis was an emotional wreck and ready to bolt the awards ceremony until calmed by her mother.

Then on Sunday it was the men's championship that produced another twenty-nine year old champion, Andre Agassi, himself noted most for his disappointing roller-coaster career. The player, who seemed cable of winning several grand slams early in his career, fell victim to fame and glamour and failed to fulfill the promise.

Throughout the two weeks of this tournament Agassi was showing the old form once again, but Sunday in the first two sets which he lost 6-1 and 6-2 it appeared that the French championship would once again elude him. The old Agassi, the one without character, would have been finished at this point. He would have rolled over in the third set, taken his fat check for second place, and headed to the clubs of Paris.

The new and improved, emotionally mature Agassi dug in and refocused. In fact late in the second set there were minor signs of life. Then he took set three 6-4 and set four 6-3. It looked like Andrei Medvedev was finished, but he too of comeback fame at age twenty-four dug in and fought back. In the end Agassi was too much, and in the end we saw the Agassi of all that promise

deliver. It was without doubt the greatest victory of his career, largely because he understood what a great victory it was.

Andre Agassi now is only the fifth player in the history of men's tennis to win all four grand slam events in his career. He joins such greats as Rod Laver, Roy Emerson, Don Budge and Fred Perry. Notice there is no one from the past thirty years on this very short list. The Andre Agassi of all that promise was real and on Sunday in Paris he finally appeared, no longer the brat, no longer concerned only about image, now just playing tennis in the manner everyone has waited for him to do.

As for Medvedev, the Ukrainian twice overruled the line judges who had ruled in his favor, a major miracle in contemporary sport. Medvedev then joined in celebrating Agassi's history making day, his own comeback, the game of tennis, and the French Open. He knows the joy of being a part of one of those marvelous moments in sport which transcend the mere mortal and keep us coming back, even to watch the brats, because some of them turn into mature champions.

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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