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Ruminating on the U.S. Open Tennis Championships

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Looking back to the first radio commentary I did six years ago, the subject was the U.S. Open Tennis Championships where the stellar performance that year by Jimmy Connors, especially in his late night match against Patrick McEnroe, was such a contrast with the sorry performance by the overhyped Andre Agassi. Connors has since moved on to the seniors tour while Agassi's career remains largely the story of the failure to live up to the hype and the potential.

Now six years later as I prepare to leave for Russia and therefore end this run of over 300 weekly radio essays, it is again time for the U.S. Open. This year the event is being held in a new venue, with the Arthur Ashe Stadium as the featured center court at the new Flushing Meadow complex.

Last weekend the \$254 million Stadium opened with a clinic for youngsters hosted by Bill Cosby, and on Monday it was inaugurated in ceremonies tainted by the controversy over the Mayor's absence, and the grumbling from the ordinary fans about the positioning of the luxury boxes.

It is all a perfect measure of sport in our time.

Mayor Giuliani's absence stems from the 1993 mayor's race when Giuliani criticized provisions in the deal negotiated between Mayor David Dinkins and the U.S.T.A. which called for fines of the city if the airplanes from La Guardia flew over the stadium during the matches. Giuliani also stayed away from the Open last year, announcing his own personal boycott of the event over the airplane re-routing issue. This is just the sort of faux politics of the 90's that passes for populism.

The configuration and cost of the new facility is another matter, and it is rich with irony that it is named for the late Arthur Ashe. It will feature 89 luxury suites with carpeting and terraces overlooking the court at a cost of \$85,000 to \$100,000 during the two week tournament, and \$26,000 to \$48,000 for a courtside box. Loge seats at \$11,500 for six seats over the two weeks now are pushed away from the court by the boxes, much to the chagrin of the mid-size corporations and ordinary high rollers who loved the tax-deductible opportunity to entertain their clients at courtside.

When leases for the suites and boxes became available they were quickly grabbed up by such figures as Donald Trump, Arthur Andersen, and Paine Webber. The suites have wet bars, two phone lines, refrigerators, couches and chairs covered with Ralph Lauren fabrics, ice makers, private bathrooms, and maids and butlers. There is a separate entrance for those in the suites (a kind of haute segregation), private food service to the suites, and two restaurants on the grounds for the use of the suite and box occupants only.

"It's going to be a hot territory," says The Donald. "There's a lot of business out there, and you have to create the right atmosphere to get it. Hey, it's all about money." No one could offer a better summary of this national distortion of values named after the tennis ambassador to the inner-city.

One should not, however, make the mistake of thinking that it is the masses who have been dispossessed here. Clearly those who held courtside tickets in the old venue were not among the unwashed. What we have here is a case of the well-heeled having been displaced by the super rich and the corporations. All that remains is for the poor to be saddled with the blame and we will have a fully sculpted American story.

All this seems to have an internal logic that has become normative—we need more money, therefore we tap the privileged and the corporations by giving them more privileges and drive more and more people out of the stadia and back to their TV's. At some point the TV will no longer be an acceptable venue and will not sustain adequate ratings to satisfy sponsors. When that happens this amazing smoke and mirrors game in sport will crumble under its own weight.

That day will come, but it is uncertain how close we are to it now. The only certainty is that with each new sky box and each new record salary we inch inevitably closer to the day of reckoning.

In closing I want to thank the people at WUCF-FM who six years ago gave me the opportunity to do something that I had wanted to do for a long time. I also want to thank Peter Carroll who for nearly all of the six years provided the production assistance, the introductions, and edited the tapes and mini-discs. And finally I want to thank all of those who have listened, and more recently those who have read the transcripts via the internet, and have commented on the opinions expressed here each Friday. It truly has been my pleasure.

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

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