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## US Open Tennis: A Little Bit of Everything Including Racism

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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This was a U.S. Open Tennis championship with something for everyone. Great matches, poor matches, a reclamation of tennis from the masses, prime time for the women's game, and a host of other goodies.

The United States Tennis Association through much of its history maintained this tournament as a plaything for the rich. Somehow over the years with the intervention of television and the rising popularity of tennis the influences of the masses have insinuated themselves into the U.S. Open. The exclusivity of the event has been eroded by commercial forces and the general changes in American life involving race, class and gender.

With the building of the new Tennis Center at Flushing Meadow and naming of it after Arthur Ashe, the USTA has been able to reclaim the event to serve wealth and power, while making it appear that nothing has really changed.

Make no mistake however this facility and this event are for the rich, both in individual and corporate terms. The lower levels of seating are almost all corporate boxes. You can see the names of some of them on TV, while others who pay less have only the luxury box itself. This year corporate sponsors put an estimated \$40 million into the US Open revenue stream. The masses sit upstairs and the riff-raff at the top of the Stadium where they can scarcely see the tennis except via the two new video screens.

There are ninety luxury suites and each carries a price tag estimated at \$110,000 for the two-week tournament. In addition there is a mandatory payment of \$24,000 for catered food for the two-week event. You pay this whether you eat or not, whether you are there or not. And to think people were complaining about concession stand prices at the National Tennis Center.

In one of my favorite corporate moments Heineken America presented Pete Sampras with a \$5,000 check to be given to a charity in his name. As I watched this quaint little ceremony on the TV I wondered how far \$5,000 would go and how much Heineken had to pay to CBS and the USTA for the right to make this presentation on national television. My guess is that the network and the tennis people did a little better on this transaction than the charity receiving the five grand.

Despite all of this the 2001 U.S. Open produced some excellent tennis, none better than the quarterfinal match between Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi. Through four sets with no break of serve this was a marvelous match showcasing two superb tennis champions playing at their very best. Each set ended with a tiebreaker. Agassi won the first and Sampras the next three. This may have been the greatest match in Open history.

In the first tiebreaker Agassi won 9-7 after being down 6-3. Agassi survived three set points in a row. In the second set tiebreak Sampras overpowered Agassi 7-2 with the full array of his shots: serve, volley, overhead, etc. The third tiebreaker started badly for Sampras with a double fault to go down one mini-break, but he recovered and won 7-2 closing with two booming service aces.

The fourth and final set saw break point opportunities for both men and both successfully fought off disaster. This tiebreaker was the most dramatic of the four. As in game one Sampras went up 6-3 going from 2-3 to 6-3 with two aces and two mini-breaks of Agassi.

It is triple match point and Agassi saves the first to go to 6-4. Sampras then double-faults to 6-5. It looks like a repeat of game one, but Agassi serves, Sampras returns, and Agassi cannot return. After 3 hours and 33 minutes, at about 12:20 a.m. EDT it is over. Everyone in the stadium and everyone at home are exhausted and know they have just seen a great sports event.

The only question that remains is if Sampras will have the necessary energy to make it through the semis and the final. He easily beat Marat Safin in the semis but was smoked in the finals by Lleyton Hewitt.

The other big positive at this US Open was the fact that the Women's Final was played in prime time on Saturday night. It was a historic night for women's tennis in this respect and Billie Jean King was there to mark the occasion. This was the first prime time television for a women's match since Billie Jean met Bobby Riggs in the Houston Astrodome.

It was a big night too because two great tennis players who are African-American and are sisters played each other in the championship final. Certainly Arthur Ashe would have savored this moment for the Williams sisters as much as Billie Jean King did. It had a little added luster due to the fact that it was

exactly forty-four years to day that Althea Gibson won her first US Open title.

The tennis didn't live up to the magnitude of the event nor to the excessive Hoopla prior to the match. But then this is New York, and these are Americans, and it is a TV event so Hoopla is a given. Certainly there is something to be said for the opportunity to see Diana Ross's hair, even if the price one must pay is to listen to her sing God Bless America.

Finally let me say that Lleyton Hewitt put on a marvelous display of tennis, not just in the finals against Sampras but also in his defeat of Andy Roddick in the quarterfinals and Yevgeny Kafelnikov in the semi-finals. One can only hope that Hewitt will take some of his winnings and trot over to the UN building and purchase all the documents he can from this week's UN Conference on Racism. The fact that Hewitt was not fined for his racist comments is further proof that the tennis establishment retains much of its elitist American WASP view of the world.

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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