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Andre Agassi's Exhibitionism/ Jimmy Connors's Courage

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
September 2, 1991

It's that special time of year when for the maniacal sports fan there is a smorgasbord of events on the table. The NFL has opened with its new 17-week regular season format and without Joe Montana. The baseball pennant races are coming down to the wire, and both the Atlanta Braves and Minnesota Twins are making their fans believe in miracles. College football is underway with FSU, Miami and Florida all ranked in the top five in most pre-season polls, and with both FSU and Miami winning impressively in their first game. Over the past ten days several world records were set at the World Track and Field Championships in Tokyo, including the glamour 100 meter race with Carl Lewis becoming the world's fastest human, and the astonishing new long jump record set by Mike Powell. Bob Beaman's long jump record set at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City was one of those records which many thought would never be broken. And finally the fourth of the Grand Slam Tennis Tournaments, the U.S. Open is heading into its final weekend.

Any one of these events could occupy this space this week, but the U.S. Open has produced some special moments, and some interesting contrasts. In fact it was in the opening round of the Open about ten days ago when two matches illustrated two sides of sport--the sublime and the profane.

First the profane. Andre Agassi, who was defeated in straight sets by the unseated Aaron Krickstein 7-5, 7-6, 6-2 in his opening match, offers a look at the profane. Over the past several years this overrated athlete has been turned into an idol by the PR people and the advertising world. His fame has spread far and wide. Pre-adolescent girls are sent into the throes of ecstasy by his presence on the court. Much is made of his wardrobe, as it violates the tennis conventions with electric colors and spandex shorts.

In fact so much is made of Agassi's wardrobe, that when he finally appeared at Wimbledon this summer, after ducking the event for years, all that was discussed was Andre's clothes. Would he comply with Wimbledon convention? Would he attempt to add a dash of color to center court? What tension, what suspense. And when he finally appeared in all white there was a rush of computer terminals and tape machines to record that important sporting event for posterity, as well as for the waiting breathless masses of teeny bopping tennis fans.

Overlooked was the fact that although Agassi won a few matches, he didn't make the final, let alone win the event.

But then that's not the point of Andre Agassi. In his case marketing, not winning, is the only thing. The point of Agassi is endorsements, selling products, selling the wizardry of Nick Bolletari and his tennis academy. Commercialized sport has had no greater exposition of its crass character, than the marketing of Andre Agassi. If he never wins a single grand slam event, he will have won too many. The marketing of Andre Agassi displays all that is wrong with modern sport. He has never won a grand slam event, yet somehow he has been sold to the public as a great star of tennis. The triumph of style over substance may never have been greater, and it may yet kill sport, or at least take the heart of it.

Never has so much, been made of so little, by so many.

Thankfully the U.S. Open has offered the sublime as well as the profane. It too appeared in the first round, coming in the form of thirty-eight year old Jimmy Connors, who managed to keep several million Americans on the East Coast of the United States up until 1:30 a.m. while he pursued the ghost of his youth, and gave the nation a lesson in sport. At 11:30 p.m. Tuesday, August 27, Patrick McEnroe was leading Jimmy Connors two sets to love. The scores 6-4 and 7-6. So it looked like the old man would go down to defeat, and no one would be all that surprised. That assessment seemed even more realistic when McEnroe went up in the third set. And then something happened. Connors got an opening, and he was off and running. And running, and running, and running. By the end of the fourth set the crowd was in a frenzy, and Connors was twenty-two again.

If at this point Connors had run out of gas, and then gone down to defeat, it would have surprised no one. It would still have been a great and glorious match, and a tremendous victory for Connors. But he didn't run out of gas, he just kept coming and kept running, feeding off the energy of the crowd. And when the match ended at 1:30 a.m. on August 28 some four hours and twenty minutes after it began, the improbable had happened. Jimmy Connors had rallied from two sets down to win his first round match against Patrick McEnroe by the scores of 4-6, 6-7, 6-4, 6-2, 6-4.

Jimmy Connors had demonstrated why sport is such a wonderful showcase for the human spirit. He had offered his best, he had exerted himself beyond all limits, and he had finished with a

victory for himself and for sport. He also won the match, but that was incidental. Jimmy Connors displayed the sporting spirit at its best, and had removed the mark that Agassi had made on center court the previous day.

If Agassi had even half the heart displayed by Connors the night and early morning of the 27th and 28th of August, he would no doubt be a champion and deserve the kind of adulation which has been created for him by the marketing people, who have turned Agassi into a sporting pimp for their wares.

Don't forget Agassi, but be sure to celebrate the accomplishment of Jimmy Connors. He more than anyone in recent memory, especially on the tennis courts, has offered us a look at the best that sport can produce, the best of the human spirit.

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