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## Tennis in Decline in the 90's

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The U.S. Open Tennis Championships began its two-week run in New York on Monday. Most of the big names of the past two decades are gone. On the women's side Martina Navratolova is in semi-retirement, Monica Seles has never come back from the knifing of a year and a half ago, and earlier stars like Chris Everet and Billie Jean King are long since departed. On the men's side Jimmy Connors, the long-time mainstay of New York bad-manners-tennis has packed it in, while the great McEnroe-Connors, and McEnroe-Borg rivalries are history while Johnny Mac is now doing TV commentary.

The Sport of the 70s is in danger of becoming the Forgotten Sport of the 90s. Tennis which had experienced a phenomenal growth in the 70s, leveled out and then declined in the 80s, and now is in danger of total marginalization in the 90s. It is not so much that the great players have disappeared, but there seem to be no great rivalries on the court or off, and the public interest has become a waning register on the Richter Scale.

The rise of tennis as an extremely popular spectator and participatory sport in America came when Open Tennis, open to both amateurs and professionals, was accepted at Wimbledon in 1968. The next year the U.S. Championships at Forrest Hills opened, and the international ruling body fell in line shortly thereafter.

Among the new American stars who captured the public through television were Stan Smith, Arthur Ashe, Jimmy Connors, Billy Jean King and Chris Everet. Between 1970 and 1973 the television networks tripled the amount of their coverage of tennis, and television ratings for tennis reached peak popularity in 1975.

Television brought money to the formerly upper class country club sport, and money multiplied interest with the public. The money got another boost when Lamar Hunt, the Texas millionaire who had been a founder of the American Football League, jumped into tennis forming World Championship Tennis, a cartel of tennis tournaments and tours across the globe. Jack Kramer followed with the Grand Prix circuit.

With its legitimization by television and money, tennis became the in-sport of the American middle class. A little over ten and a half million people played tennis in 1970, while 34 million

were playing by 1975. Sporting goods companies tripled and then quadrupled their sales of tennis equipment, and at one point in 1973 the demand was so high that a tennis ball shortage developed.

And there was money to be made. Tennis camps and tennis ranches opened across the nation, some catering to the rich and upper-middle class, where you could go and be tutored by the pros in an atmosphere of opulence. Technology came in service to tennis with video instruction and automatic ball-throwing machines. Indoor tennis flourished in those climates where year-round outdoor courts were not feasible. In 1961 Chicago had one indoor tennis facility, and by 1974 there were forty-three. And even more amazing it was nearly impossible to get a court at those forty-three facilities unless you booked weeks or months in advance, or were willing to take a 4 a.m. court time.

The growth of tennis was in part related to the growth of women's sport, including of course women's tennis, a growth that was at least in part tied to the feminist movement of the late sixties and early seventies.

At the beginning of the 70s prize money in women's tennis was at ten per cent of that of the men, and women were not a part of the WCT or Grand Prix circuit. Then in 1971 the publisher of Women's Tennis, Gladys Heldman, formed the Virginia Slims tour and convinced the Philip Morris Tobacco Company to underwrite it. A big television contract followed, and by 1975 there was a million dollars in prize money on the Slims tour. Then by threatening to withdraw from Wimbledon and Forrest Hills women were able to bring parity in prize money to the Grand Slam events. Key in all of this development was Billy Jean King and her young rival Chris Evert, along with Evonne Gooligong, Margaret Court, and later Martina Navratolova.

All of this growth reached an odd climax in 1975 when the largest crowd ever to attend a tennis match, 30,472 at the Astrodome, were joined by millions on television to watch Billy Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in the over-hyped and now legendary "Battle of the Sexes."

But in the end the mid-seventies proved to be the high point for tennis, and it has never again matched the high TV ratings and the heavy participatory demand. In the 70s it was almost impossible to get a court at public venues for a month following Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. No similar surge is likely to follow this year's play at the U.S. Open.

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