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U.S. Open: Seles and Graf, Agassi and Sampras

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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After the Cal Ripken experience last week it's difficult to come back to reality and deal with the assorted goodies that sportsworld has dealt us in recent days. The crime report out of Nebraska shows us that Oklahoma and Miami are not the only programs that harbor troubled youth. The stories out of Dallas involving Jerry Jones, Nike, Pepsi, and Deion Sanders remind us just how central money has become in sport. While local heroes show us the arrogance of fame and fortune at the Waffle House.

It would be a simple matter to take any one of these stories and run with them. The corruption of sport by commercial forces is after all the central sports story of our time.

But this week I want to stay with the upside and reflect on the U.S. Open which offers some hope that sport is not irredeemably corrupt. The Open had all the proper story lines. In both the women's and the men's draw the two top players in the world reached the finals.

From the opening round tennis fans, and most sports fans acquainted with tennis, were hoping for a women's final of Steffi Graf and Monica Seles. Nothing else would do, and anything else would have been a setback for women's tennis.

Monica Seles was in the first grand slam event of her comeback. She had just won the Canadian Open the previous week, and was now ready to go to centercourt for a serious look under the spotlight. To get there she would need to win several matches during the two weeks, and clearly there were questions about her durability and the level of her game. In storybook fashion Seles stormed through her side of the draw, looking every bit the number one player she had been two years ago. And she was doing it with great joy: giggling, laughing, and fully appreciating the opportunity to compete.

Steffi Graf marched through her side of the draw in the methodical manner that has been her trademark over the past several years. For Steffi it was not a comeback from injury, but a challenge to keep her concentration through minor injuries and off court distractions. She has not seen her father in several months, as he is in a German jail for tax fraud.

Someone observed during the telecast that the fate of Steffi's father who can not get out of jail, as opposed to the man who

stabbed Seles and then walked free from the courtroom twice, is a sad commentary on the German legal system.

So when these two superb tennis players reached the finals of the U.S. Open Tennis Championships at Flushing Meadows last Saturday, they both got there on difficult and challenging roads. To finally see the match between the two best women tennis players in the world, and perhaps the two best women tennis players ever, and to have it occur under these circumstances, was more than any sportsfan could ask, and it was just what women's tennis needed.

The beauty of the match was twofold. First the tennis was played at a very high level. Some of the greatest points in the history of center court were played, and the power with which both players hit the ball has never been matched in women's tennis. Second, the outcome was perfect. Seles extended Graff on nearly every point, and extended her to the end of the match. In the end Seles ran out of steam, but she served notice that she is back, that she is near the top of her game, and, most importantly, the Seles-Graff rivalry is alive and well, and should produce some of the best tennis ever, over the next three to five years.

The only problem is that the match was held on Saturday and sandwiched between the men's semi-finals. This was the best match of the tournament, and it should have been featured on the program. There are still too many people in sport who place gender ahead of their appreciation of sport. There simply is no excuse for this. It doesn't even happen at Wimbledon.

On the men's side the number one and number two matchup of Agassi and Sampras was also much anticipated, and it too did not disappoint. One of the most memorable points ever played on centercourt came in the last point of the first set, won by Sampras, taking something like twelve shots, with each one at full power from the baseline. Both men showed why they are one and two in the world, and both went on to produce a magnificent late afternoon of championship tennis.

For me what is most interesting here is fact that Agassi has at last reached his full potential as a tennis player while he has matured as human being. Andre Agassi was the best living example of the emptiness of modern sport with its hype and commercialization-the creature from Nike. It is to Andre Agassi's credit that he has gone beyond that to become one of

the great professional tennis players of our time. I never thought I would be able to say that.

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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