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The Australian Open

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE The Australian Open

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Each year the Australian Open seems to produce some excellent tennis in the form of a dramatic match, a surprising winner, or some other wonder. It is the first of the Grand Slam events of the year and as such has a significance for anyone even slightly interested in tennis.

Unfortunately it comes to the North American Sports world at a time not normally associated with tennis. It also takes place in a time zone not particularly suited to North American television viewing, requiring fans to be night owls or willing to watch a replay the morning after the match ends.

This year the event produced a cornucopia of big matches, dramatic tennis, and record breaking results. In a sport that in recent years has served youth and in which teenagers were burning out, this Australian Open showcased the aging stars and champions of the last two decades. It was not quite the seniors tour but it did feature primarily those over thirty-five. The exception is Rafael Nadal who is 30.

On the men's side the drama built during the week as Roger Federer, apparently on the downside of his career at age 35, cut down three top-ten ranked opponents on what was considered an impossible trip to the final. His defeat of Stan Wawrinka in the semi-finals was a five set marathon that was still going on as fans in the U.S. rolled out of bed. In his post-match interview Federer talked about how great it was that he would face his nemesis and friend Rafael Nadal in the final.

The only problem with Roger's look forward was that Nadal had not yet made it to the finals. He still had to face Grigor Dimitrov to get there. That match too produced high drama and high quality tennis over five sets and nearly five hours.

Federer was looking for his 18th Grand Slam championship, something he had been looking for since he won at Wimbledon in 2012. Many felt he would never get that next victory. Nadal was looking for his 15th Grand Slam win which would pull him within two of Federer. Nadal was seeded 9th and Federer 17th. The one and two seeds, Murray and Djokovic, lost early. The excitement built quickly and ticket prices rose geometrically.

With all this buzz swirling around the tennis world few could have anticipated just what an amazing show the finals turned out to be. For the first four sets the match went back and forth. Federer won the first and third set, while Nadal took the second and fourth set. Indeed near the end of the fourth set it was looking as if Federer was finished.

After a medical break Federer returned to the court and Nadal welcomed him back with a service break. Surely now Roger's quest for 18 was over as Nadal went up 3-1. If you were clairvoyant you could have made a small fortune betting that not only would Federer win, but that Nadal would not win another game.

In this last set Federer had five break points before he finally broke on his sixth try. His first break made it 3-3. The next game he won on a service love. Game 8 was epic as Federer went up 40-0 and then Nadal took it back to Deuce. Then in the "point of the match" it took 26 shots before Federer got to another

break point. Then Nadal served an Ace and Federer followed with two points to win.

In the last game as Federer served for the match Nadal went up quickly Love-30. Federer hit an ace, but Nadal won the next point. Nadal had two opportunities to break Federer's serve, but in the end he could not. Federer served an ace to make it 30-40 and then sent it to Deuce. Federer won the next point, served for the match, but Nadal saved the point. Federer hit another ace and then won on the next point when he caught the outside line, confirmed by a Nadal challenge.

After 1-3 each game turned into a struggle, each game was filled with tension, and each featured magnificent shot making from both players. It seemed like an ultimate test of wills that Federer won along with his 18th Grand Slam victory leading many to acclaim him as the greatest of all time in men's tennis, or at least in the Open era.

If this was a great story, the Women's championship was even more so. The Williams sisters brought two great stories and a lot of excellent tennis to the Australian Open. Venus Williams, the older sister at 36, seemed to be on the downside of her tennis career. Venus had not played in a Grand Slam final since 2009 at Wimbledon where she was beaten by Serena. Personal tragedy and severe health issues dogged her and diminished her game. Over the past two weeks Venus Williams played with tremendous energy, moved quickly around the court, and seemed to play with a joy and enthusiasm that she has not shown in recent years.

Watching Venus play her way to the final was like turning back the clock. In the semi-final match against CoCo Vanderweghe Venus lost the first set in a tie-break. She then moved her game up another gear and in the end dominated the much younger player, who by all accounts was playing the best tennis of her career going into this match. Marion Bartoli, former Wimbledon champion spoke for many when she said, "I watched Venus today celebrating after she won the semifinal like she was a 6-year-old girl, and it made you want to cry for joy."

This meant that Venus would meet her sister in the finals renewing a rivalry that began in 1998 in Australia when Venus beat Serena in a second-round match. This match on Saturday would be the first against Serena in Melbourne since 2003 when Serena won her fourth grand slam event in row. All four of those Grand Slam wins were against Venus.

As for Serena Williams at age 35 this Grand Slam held great significance as a win would be another record breaking achievement. She defeated Venus 6-4, 6-4, for her 23rd grand slam victory passing the great Steffi Graf for the most Slam wins in the Open era for men or women. Some say this cements her place as the greatest women's tennis player of all time.

For those who have watched Serena Williams over the course of her brilliant career, seen the power of her serve, the brilliance of her court play, and her competitive fire, the number 23 is only a number, albeit a record. It has been clear for some time now that she is the greatest of all time.

It may be fitting that Serena won this event and set this record against Venus, and no doubt Venus had an appreciation of this match beyond whatever anyone else may have felt about it.

These two great players have transformed tennis in untold numbers of ways. For the casual fan or the fanatic to see these two make history together has been one of the great pleasures of this or any other sport.

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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