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The Australian Open

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Australian Open
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It is the week before the week before the Super Bowl. The beauty of the week is that there is no football, a relief after the emotional roller coaster of the three weeks of playoff football, ten games played at an intensity level worthy of brain surgery. It is a perfect time for a change of pace; the perfect time for a little tennis. Thus the Australian Open, the first grand slam event of the year, this year celebrating its 100th Anniversary.

There are, however, several problems with this event, and this year the problems seem to be accentuated. First, there is something wrong with the Australian clock, or is it the calendar? I was sitting watching just a superb match the other night when Dick Enberg pointed out it was 4:15 Thursday afternoon. I hit the panic button. I missed my Sport History class. It just ended. I wasn't even on campus. Then I remembered it was really 11:15 and it was Wednesday night. Something needs to be done about this.

Worse yet, many of the best match-ups of the tournament and best matches of the tournament started at 3:30 a.m. here. It is time to seriously consider moving Australia, and if that is not feasible then moving the Australian Open out of Australia to a more congenial time zone. In short, this event offers too much excellent tennis to be taking place while I am sleeping.

Luckily I did see some of the best matches of the women's draw, and I did see parts of some of the best men's matches on tape delay, a pale substitute for live tennis. Worse yet, the men's final took place at 3:30 a.m., Sunday night in Melbourne. This is, I believe, a first. I can remember watching both the Saturday and Sunday finals on Friday and Saturday nights in previous years.

It really is a shame as the tennis played was of a very high quality. Mary Carillo, the ESPN commentator, said that this year's Australian Open has offered the highest quality men's tennis she has ever seen. By all accounts the match between the invincible Roger Federer and Andre Agassi was an example of flawless tennis on both sides, leading to a straight sets win by Federer. This was followed two nights later by Marat Safin's five set victory over Federer which was apparently as good as it

gets. This four and one-half hour heavyweight battle was Federer's first loss in twenty-six matches.

Both matches were 3:30 a.m. affairs and were replayed the following afternoon allowing me the added frustration of missing them twice. ESPN offered the Federer/Safin match one more time on ESPN classic as an oxymoronic "Instant Classic." Had I been living in Orlando's "newest traditional community" I would have made a greater effort to watch.

I did see some excellent tennis, live. These matches were on the women's side. Serena Williams may well be back to top form, or near it. In her major struggle with Maria Sharapova, Williams fought off three match points and won in three sets. Along the way both of these marvelous players displayed in their very different styles, the form that has put them at the top of women's tennis. Sharapova cruised through the first set hitting a dazzling array of overpowering serves and groundstrokes that had Williams on her heels.

Sharapova served for the match at 5-4 in both the second and third sets and each time Williams seemed to will the game into her column. Both times Maria Sharapova exposed her inexperience as she couldn't close the deal. The third set went over an hour and both players held nothing back. In the end it was Serena Williams who outlasted the seventeen-year-old Russian through a combination of skill, power, tenacity and will. By the end of that match it was clear that the twenty-three year-old champion was back at the top of her game. With smooth strokes that mask the power of her game, Sharapova has the skills to match this level of play someday, and one would bet she will. For now Serena Williams is back on the top where she belongs.

In the final Williams played the current number one, Lindsay Davenport. After a first set in which Williams never seemed to get started and had to deal with a muscle pull, the match took a sharp reversal of fortune half way through the second set. Both players were playing well with Davenport seeming to have the edge. Then at 2-2 Davenport had six break points on Serena and could not take the advantage. Again Williams put her will and tenacity on display fighting off what might have been a fatal loss of serve. In the following two games both players held serve with ease.

Then the night, or was it day, took one of those astounding turns from Clash of the Titans to Collapse of the Century. Davenport was cruising along up 40-0 in the game about to even

the set at 4-4. She sliced a shot just beyond the line that looked born of indecision, double-faulted, and went on to loose six straight points. Serving at 5-4 Williams took the set. Six games later, having won nine straight games, the match was over and Serena Williams had won her seventh Australian Open Title.

Lindsay Davenport looked like someone who had just wandered into Times Square from the remote jungles of the Amazon. Dazed and confused, without any sense of where she was or what she was doing there. It might not be an exaggeration to say that she was going through the motions. As for Serena Williams she quickly dispatched the wreckage, picked up the trophy, and put everyone on notice that if anyone was going to win the Grand Slam this year, it would be her.

On the men's side Lleyton Hewitt after riding the wave of emotion from the crowd in the first set in the men's final, went down in the next three sets to Safin. The Russian now looks like he is back to form and ready to cash-in his potential and become a star on the men's side of tennis. So the Australian Open ends with the first Australian in a final in nearly two decades, and this part of the globe sleeping through the excitement.

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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