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Great tennis at the 2005 US Open

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Great tennis at the 2005 US Open
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Thirty years ago the country was in a tennis frenzy. Television had discovered the sport and colorful and attractive personalities seemed to be in an endless supply as they paraded before the cameras. Public tennis courts were overcrowded with people from seven to seventy. At the indoor courts of the major cities you were lucky to be able to get a reservation to play between three and four o'clock in the morning. Manufacturers of tennis equipment were making money hand over fist, and the tennis ball factories working around the clock (what we would now term 24/7), could not meet demand. Major discount stores had empty shelves where tennis balls had once gathered dust. It was all rather astounding.

Thirty years later it is a bit difficult to persuade people that such a time ever existed, but then a lot of people have difficulty believing that such a time as the seventies ever existed, including many of us who lived through the decade. Tennis no longer has the mass appeal it had then, but for those who still follow the sport, even casually, it still has its moments. One could also argue that the current generation of tennis players is as good as any that has preceded them and in many cases better.

The women's game has never been better. It has more depth of talent and skill levels are higher than ever. The Russian contingent alone provides amazing depth to the women's game, and the talent of such players as the Williams sisters and the two Belgian stars, Justine Henin-Hardenne and Kim Clijsters, makes this one of the best of times ever for women's tennis.

In men's tennis Roger Federer is displaying talent the likes of which has never been seen before. John McEnroe calls Federer the best shot maker in the history of the game. Indeed he has dominated men's tennis over the past few years, and in the past two years he has won both the U.S. Open and Wimbledon, something achieved only twice previously, by Bill Tilden and Don Budge, in the 1920s and 30s respectively.

Like all great athletes Roger Federer executes his game with amazing ease. His movement on the court is lightning fast while appearing to be nearly effortless. His strokes are smooth and

deadly. His serve is blistering and struck without visible expenditure of energy. His game plan is always well thought out and perfectly executed. Today, after staving off all that Andre Agassi could put together, and that was a lot, he then proceeded to dismantle the American with amazing dispatch.

As with many of the U.S. Opens, this one had its greatest moments earlier in the draw. Two quarterfinal matches reached considerable heights of drama and excellence. In her quarterfinal match against Venus Williams, Kim Clijsters put on a stunning display of tennis under pressure. Down one set and 2-4 in the second set to Williams it looked as if Clijsters would go through another grand slam event without a trophy. Then she roared back winning eleven of the last thirteen games over Williams. In the final set Williams was completely overpowered and left gasping.

The saga continued in the semifinals where Clijsters met Maria Sharapova the seventeen year-old Russian-qua-American. Here Clijsters managed to easily win the first set only to give away the second set, which she lost in a tiebreaker after dropping five set points. Improbably Clijsters roared back in the third set. Her triumph in the finals over Mary Pierce was anticlimactic, but the victory by Clijsters, her first in five grand slam finals, crowned a tremendous comeback season following wrist surgery that had kept her off the tour for nearly a year.

As for Andre Agassi, this week saw him put on a late night display of tennis reminiscent of the 1991 Jimmy Connor's victory in the first round against Patrick McEnroe. The August 27 match ended on the 28th at 1:30 a.m. McEnroe had won the first two sets from Connors and at age 38 Connors looked ticketed for an early exit. Then something happened and Connors began an amazing comeback winning the next three sets. The entire ordeal was four hours and twenty minutes, and from the third set on Connors was running like a madman on the court while the crowd was worked into a screaming lather. In the quarterfinal, Connors, on his 39th birthday, staged another dramatic comeback against Aaron Krickstein, which many recalled this week after the Agassi/Blake match.

Agassi's victory in the quarterfinal against James Blake had many similarities to the Connors/McEnroe match of 1991. Both Connors and Agassi were in the twilight of their careers, with Connors 38 and Agassi 35. Like Connors, Agassi lost the first two sets and roared back to take the next three. Like the

earlier match, this one started on one day of the calendar and ended on the next. Agassi's victory came at 1:19 a.m. and Connors' victory came at 1:30 a.m.

There were also differences. The third set was a titanic struggle between Agassi and Blake with Blake missing an opportunity to win the match serving at 5-4 and having Andre down 15-40. Blake couldn't close the deal and ultimately Agassi prevailed in the tiebreaker. The crowd was roaring as it had been in 1991, but this time it was roaring for the performance of both competitors in one of those memorable matches that the U.S. Open seems to serve up in the wee hours of the morning.

The tennis madness of the seventies may be gone forever, but the grand game can still pump the adrenaline with the kind of great play and drama on display at the U.S. Open during this past two weeks.

As they always seem to do, several players stepped forward to showcase the beauty and wonder of 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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