

6-11-2006

A remarkable weekend

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "A remarkable weekend" (2006). *On Sport and Society*. 723.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/723>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A remarkable weekend
JUNE 11, 2006

It is difficult to remember another weekend like this in the world of sport. The words "feast," "cornucopia," and "festival," all seem inadequate to describe the variety, quality, and significance of this weekend's sports menu.

On the international stage, the world's most important sports event has just begun. The World Cup, by most any measure, is the premier event of world sport, more important even than the Olympic games. It began on Friday with the host country Germany winning, as it should, over Costa Rica, and Ecuador blanking Poland 2-0 in a mild upset. On Saturday, England opened with a win, 1-0, on what was ruled an "own goal," although I would argue that David Beckham's blistering, bending shot that went off the head of a Paraguayan player should have been ruled Beckham's goal on a deflection in the manner that such goals are given in hockey.

The best World Cup event of the first weekend, however, came when Trinidad and Tobago played Sweden to a draw, 0-0. The Swedish players will be having nightmares about this game for months and perhaps years to come, as the last minute substitute in goal, Shaka Hislop, was unconscious, stopping everything sent his way whether he saw it or not.

Saturday, at the French Open, Justine Henin-Hardenne won her third championship, defeating Svetlana Kuznetsova 6-4, 6-4 on clay at Roland Garos Stadium in Paris. The two close sets lacked drama as Kuznetsova never really seemed in control of any part of the match. It was the fifth major title for Henin-Hardenne.

Sunday, in the Men's Final in Paris, there was as much drama as anyone could want. Roger Federer was trying to become only the third man to hold all four grand slam titles at one time, and Rafael Nadal was trying to continue his mastery of Federer on the clay surface while extending his record streak of clay court wins to sixty. Nadal did both.

After the opening set, won 6-1 by Federer, Nadal, the twenty year old Spaniard, reversed the score and took the second set 6-1. Nadal took the third set 6-4, seemingly in control of the match. In the decisive fourth set Nadal served for the championship at 5-4, but could not close out Federer. Both

players held serve to send the match into a tiebreak, won by Nadal in convincing fashion.

This was Nadal's second consecutive French title and Federer's first Grand Slam final loss. Nadal is 4-0 against Federer this year, and Federer is 44-0 against everyone else. Federer's frustration on clay will now continue, reminiscent in many ways of Ivan Lendl's frustration on grass. The difference, of course, is that Federer's nemesis seems to be Nadal, as much as the clay, while Lendl's major obstacle was of the vegetative variety rather than any particular human.

If all this isn't enough excitement for one weekend, the NBA Finals are now underway in Dallas where the Mavericks held home court by dominating the Miami Heat in the first two games. In addition, Saturday night, the Stanley Cup Finals continued in Edmonton where the Oilers were able to post a 2-1 victory and close the Carolina advantage to 2-1. It was as well played a hockey match as I have seen in several years. Both teams played with high intensity and displayed tremendous skills, executing near flawless end-to-end hockey.

In golf this weekend, the LPGA Championship took place in Maryland and the final round featured a logjam at the top of the leader board with Karrie Webb and Si Re Pak finishing in a tie. Six other golfers finished within two strokes of the leaders and nearly all of them had their opportunities to win. Pak emerged as the winner with a birdie on the first extra hole, completing a comeback for the 28-year-old Korean.

Track and Field, or as the rest of the world calls it, Athletics, saw two world class achievements. Sunday, Asafa Powell ran 9.77 seconds at the British Grand Prix to equal his own record in the 100 meters, a record he shares with Justin Gatlin. In the NCAA national championships, Xavier Carter won the 100- and 400-meter races, with the finals of the two races taking place 31 minutes apart. He finished his day anchoring the 1600-meter relay team and winning gold, to add to his gold medal in the 400-meter relay Friday night. The achievement is being compared to the four medals won by Jesse Owens in 1935 and 1936 for Ohio State. In 1935 Owens set four world records at the Big Ten Championships, and did it within just over an hour's time.

Saturday was also the Belmont, the third of horse racing's triple-crown events. This year there was not much excitement generated as there was no horse set to win the triple, and neither the Kentucky Derby winner nor the Preakness winner was

entered at Belmont. Still, for horse racing fans it was the third race of the triple-crown, and as such something to see. The race itself was quite exciting as Jazil picked his way through nearly the entire field to win with an 18-year-old jockey, Fernando Jara, in the saddle.

In the US, sports fans could also treat themselves to the NCAA Baseball Super Regional tournaments this weekend. The Arena Bowl Championship, which may qualify in some quarters as sport, took place in Las Vegas, which seems like a good place for it. No doubt somewhere or another there were cars zooming around and around and around to the delight of many hundreds of thousands of fans of motor sports.

All in all it was a remarkable weekend of first rate athletic competition. This will be matched next weekend only if Tiger Woods wins the US Open, his first tournament since the death of his father. The Open will finish on Father's Day.

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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