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Williams vs. Williams, Federer vs. Nadal

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Williams vs. Williams, Federer vs. Nadal
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It was a magnificent tennis match. Two evenly matched players, who admired each other's game, competed as they had done many times before. It turned out to be the best tennis match that each had ever played against the other, and it was on the Centre Court of the All England Club for the Championship at Wimbledon.

The amazing thing is that this description could apply equally to both the Ladies' Singles Championship on Saturday and the Gentlemen's Singles Championship on Sunday. The Ladies' Championship involved two sisters and went two sets for about two hours. The Gentleman's Championship involved two major rivals and turned into the longest Wimbledon Championship in history, coming in at almost five hours and played over nearly nine hours. Delayed by rain at the outset and then twice during the match, many were already proclaiming this match the greatest Wimbledon final in history well before it ended in the waning evening light of the London summer.

The Williams sisters have played many times before, several in grand slam finals, and invariably have produced lackluster or sloppy tennis. Too often it was painful to watch. At last on Saturday there was a match between these two fabulous players that rose to the level of their great talent. Each called forth from the other the best tennis they were capable of playing. It was a treat by any measure, but it was particularly sweet for those who have been waiting years for this match-up to produce play at this level.

Venus Williams, the older of the two sisters at twenty-eight, had lost the previous five grand slam championships in which she faced her younger sister, Serena. But Venus Williams as defending champion at Wimbledon was in search of her fifth Ladies' Singles title and third in the last four years. This is definitely her surface and her place. Only Martina Navratilova and Steffi Graf have won more Ladies' Singles Championships at the All-England Club.

In the first few games of the match it looked as though Venus would be playing the role of spectator to her sister's game, as Serena walked off with the first ten of eleven points in the opening games of the set. Slowly Venus clawed her way back and leveled the score at 4-4 before going to win the first set 7-5.

Venus won the second set 6-4 and it too was anything but easy. In the end, however, it was a fifth singles title at Wimbledon for Venus Williams, tying her with Roger Federer among active players.

Venus Williams was a thing of beauty on the court as she used her powerful serve at record speeds while moving with grace and speed across the grass court. Statistically Serena dominated the two sets, but at every big point, offensively and defensively, Venus Williams came out on top. The match produced great shots, marvelous rallies, a high level of sportsmanship, and great drama. Who could have asked for more?

If you did ask for more, you only had to wait twenty-four hours to get it. Again the scene was Centre Court where Roger Federer, winner of the last five Gentlemen's Singles titles met Rafael Nadal, the rising star of men's tennis. Federer has dominated on grass winning 65 consecutive matches on this surface, just as Nadal has dominated on the clay courts.

Other numbers offered a hint of what was to come. Nadal had beaten Federer eleven of the fourteen matches on clay and hard courts. He won three consecutive French Open championships against Federer and one semi-final match there. In their first Wimbledon Final in 2006 Federer won in four sets, losing only in a third-set tie-breaker. Then last year Federer won again. This time it went five sets and Federer was able to break serve on Nadal only once. The gap was closing. At the time it was regarded as one of the great Wimbledon Finals in history.

It seemed to me then that Federer's place as the world's greatest men's tennis player was in jeopardy. The feeling was reinforced by Federer's struggles earlier this year, and then it was underlined by Nadal's total thrashing of Federer at the finals of the French Open this year, where Federer managed to win only four games in the three-set blowout.

Even though on grass at Wimbledon Federer seemed invincible, it was clear heading into yesterday's final that Federer was beatable on grass. Indeed in the first two sets it looked as if Federer would go quietly into the night.

Two rain delays and several hours later he went into the night but it was anything but quiet. This turned into an epic struggle in which both players displayed their best tennis. Nearly impossible shots, magnificent rallies, thundering serves under enormous pressure, and assertions of will that repeatedly took

your breathe away registered total disbelief on the mind.
Perfection, even in flashes, is difficult to comprehend.

Although the match went five sets including an extended fifth set, it is clear that on this day Nadal was in control. Federer had thirteen chances to break Nadal's serve and could do so only once. Nadal had a ratio of three-to-two over Federer on winners, and nearly two-to-one on unforced errors.

On the other hand Federer called on his big serve and powerful forehand several times to extend the match. It was a magnificent display of tennis, a struggle of epic proportions, and truly an historic Wimbledon final. Now we will wait to see if this was a passing of the torch in men's tennis, or if we have simply seen the greatest match between these two great tennis rivals that will produce more thrilling matches in the years ahead.

Over the past few years John McEnroe has been calling Roger Federer the greatest tennis player in history. It is clear that Rafael Nadal is now moving towards that status.

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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