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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Fabulous finals at Wimbledon
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It's been a week now since the finals were played at Wimbledon. On the women's side the Williams sisters once again demonstrated to their opponents just how difficult it will be to win a tournament during which both of them are playing their normal game. On the men's side Roger Federer entered the history books by winning his 15th Grand Slam event. As always Wimbledon offered a level of play that was memorable, and laid down new bench marks for high quality play and then reset the argumentative territory for the title "best Wimbledon match of all-time," or at the very least, in recent memory.

Although the women's final between the Williams sisters was interesting, as all Williams finals are, it was not by any stretch of the imagination a match that will live on in the legends of the All-England Club. The women's match that will be spoken of for many years to come was the Ladies semi-final between Serena Williams and Elena Dementieva.

This was a three-set match that went beyond the normal length in set three, as at Wimbledon the tie-break is not employed in the final set. The scores were 6-7, 7-5, and 8-6 in a match that went 2 hours and 49 minutes, the longest women's semi-final in the Open Era. Elena Dementieva played, by all accounts, the best tennis of her career and it was good enough to win the Ladies Championship at the All-England Club except on this particular day.

Serena Williams too played extremely high quality tennis marked by her ability to lift her game at those critical break points, or game turning points, that make the difference between winning and losing. Many of these came on her powerful, and at times, simply overpowering serve. And there was one other thing: the tennis gods were with her. On three occasions when Williams needed a point the most, Dementieva seemed to have won those points. When the points were challenged and the electronic line judge was put into play, Sereena won all three of these challenges by the thinnest of margins. It was, on this day, literally "a game of millimeters."

It is one of the great clichés of sport that a match or game was so well played that it was a shame that anyone had to lose. If

ever this was true it was on that Thursday afternoon at Wimbledon and then again on Sunday.

For the Gentleman's Final conventional wisdom had two pronouncements to make. Andy Roddick didn't have any realistic shot at winning, and this match could never equal the final from last year when Federer and Nadal battled rain delays and one another for what seemed like an eternity. That was the greatest final ever and this one would never escape the shadow cast by it.

One of the problems with conventional wisdom when applied to sport is that, although the wisdom is conventional, sport is seldom so. One factor exposed the fallacies of both pieces of this conventional wisdom and that one was Andy Roddick. He turned out not to be the same Andy Roddick whom we have watched over the years. This was a retooled Andy Roddick. He still had the great serve, he could still move around the court very well, and he could still pound those shots from the baseline.

What then was new? This was a slimmed down, better conditioned Andy Roddick. He would not run out of gas. This was a mentally tough Andy Roddick. No longer would he fold his tent in the face of adversity or self-induced mistakes. There were several indications of this. The first came in the first set when Roddick held off four break points before winning the set. The second came at the end of the second set in the tiebreaker when Roddick was up on Federer 6-2 and then watched, as did everyone else, while Federer ran off a stunning six straight points to win that set. It might well have sucked the life out of anyone.

This is without question when the old Andy Roddick would have folded his tent and gone home, quietly. He did not. The third set went to another tiebreaker. Again Federer won the set. Surely now it was over. No. Roddick rallied and won the fourth set. Remarkably Roddick had not yet been broken in the match, and Federer was dropping winners and aces on his opponent like a hail storm.

So on to set five when the tension mounted with every game. They got to 6-all and there would be no tiebreaker and on it went. When it reached 5-6 with Roddick serving to keep the match going, Roddick faced a loss of match each time he served the remainder of the afternoon. On it went arriving at 12-12; the two now having played another full set of tennis and it still wasn't over. Then at 14-15 after the second deuce of the game,

Roddick lost his serve for the first time on that day, for the first time in the 77th game of the match, and he lost the match.

No, Federer won the match.

No one could say that this performance by either man represented someone losing. There was a winner and there was the winner's opponent. Andy Roddick played the best tennis of his life and one can hope he will sustain this new level of play.

This was the longest Grand Slam final in history at four hours and eighteen minutes, the longest fifth set in Grand Slam history, Federer's fifteenth Grand Slam championship in 20 finals appearances, and his sixth win at Wimbledon. He is only the third man in the past 40 years to win both the French Open and Wimbledon in the same year.

Is he the greatest tennis player ever?

John McEnroe has been saying for a few years now that Roger Federer is the greatest player in the history of men's tennis. I don't think I can argue with that. I do know that Federer is the greatest player I have seen over a long career.

Was this the greatest tennis match ever? Or ever at Wimbledon? Perhaps. What it was, certainly, is one more example of the truth that when the Wimbledon fortnight is on, and the strawberries and cream are being served, great tennis will be served up with them.

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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