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Wimbledon

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
Wimbledon
JULY 18, 2017

The Wimbledon fortnight is my favorite fortnight of them all. The tennis is generally of high quality, the venue is steeped in beauty, and the singular notion of playing on grass, all combine to make this grand slam event the holy grail of tennis. Am I overdoing it? Well yes, but then, for me it is all of these things and more.

Over the course of the two weeks there are generally a handful of matches that stand out over the others, becoming part of the Wimbledon lore. This year was no exception, The most amazing of all the matches came before a small crowd at Centre Court and a small television audience. The Gentleman's Doubles Championship does not attract big crowds and high television ratings. Nonetheless this was *the* match of the fortnight.

I must admit that I never watch doubles for more than ten minutes at a time. I simply have no interest in this format. So normally I would not even be aware of the fact that the finals were contested between the number four seeded pair, Lukasz Kubot and Marcelo Melo, and the number sixteen seeds, Mate Pavic and Oliver Marach. I will also admit that I never had seen any of them previously.

However late Saturday afternoon I got an email from Dennis Gildea, expressing the hope that I "got to see at least the last set of the Wimbledon men's doubles final – a transcendent sporting event, enough to restore my faith in the spirit of sports." This, and a Chip Hilton reference from Clair Bee's biographer, was enough to get me to seek out the match in replay.

The doubles partners split the first four sets, 5-7, 7-5, 7-6(2), and 3-6. The surge that gave Pavic and Marach the fourth set seemed to indicate that the fifth set could be an exciting one. Initially it moved forward without drama as each team held serve. Then at 6-5 and Kubot/Melo now only one game from victory it looked as if they would close out the match. They had two championship points in the twelfth game. Pavic and Marach stiffened and scored the next four points to take the game and even the set the 6 all.

From here on the servers held as the match moved past the four hour mark. The score reached 8-7 and Marach sent a jolt through the crowd with a Love game to make it 8 all.

The next game was on the knife's edge. Kubot was serving and quickly it was Love-40. Triple break point was saved and Kubot then served out the game. It was now 9-8 with no end in sight. In turn Pavic, Melo, Marach, and Kubot held service with little trouble. The match was now just past four and a half hours old, bad light was becoming a reality, and so play was suspended for ten minutes while the roof on Centre Court was closed and the lights were turned on.

Melo served Game 23 and held service. It was now 12-11. Nothing seemed to have changed. Lighting then struck indoors. Marach served, and in what seemed like an instant it was Love -40, triple championship point. This time one more serve ended the match.

Marcelo Melo and Lukasz Kubot were the winners of this amazing struggle that went on for four hours and forty-one minutes. The shot making was excellent, the serves under pressure were stellar, there were some breathtaking rallies, and indeed as Dennis Gildea promised, it was a transcendent sporting event. It was more than anyone could ask for in sport, and another example of why sport is such a compelling and significant part of human

activity. Striving for excellence is far more important than who wins and who doesn't, as these four tennis professionals demonstrated on Saturday at Wimbledon.

The other take away from this match is a reminder that the essence of sport is not found in the numbers of tickets sold or the size of the television audience. The essence of sport is found in the performance of the athletes whether anyone is watching or not.

The other big story out of Wimbledon was Roger Federer's record-breaking eighth men's singles title. Many felt the record of seven titles set by Pete Sampras in the Open Era and William Renshaw in the late 19th century would never be surpassed.

Federer has been playing at the top of his form since the beginning of the year, after having taken six months off from tennis. He did not lose a set on his way to the championship. He is the oldest men's singles champion in history, has now won 19 Grand Slam events, and he won the first two grand slam events of this year.

Watching Federer remains one of the great spectator experiences in all of sport, as he plays the game with such smooth precision and excellent pacing. He seems to understand the game intuitively, but of course, that is actually the product of all of his work over the years to hone his skills to their highest level. If you have never read David Foster Wallace's essay on Federer, and would like to see Federer's magic put into words, now would be as good a time as ever to do so.

In the Ladies' Final Venus Williams was trying to capture her sixth Wimbledon singles title and first since 2008. Like Roger Federer she too is in her mid-thirties and was playing as well as she has played in recent memory. However, she was unable to

best Garbine Muguruza who won the title in straight sets in a fascinating match that was even after the first eight games.

Facing defeat, Muguruza fought off two championship break points making it 5-all. Then the drama ended quickly as Muguruza broke Williams serve and never looked back, winning the final nine games of the match. It was a vivid demonstration of the importance of the mental side of the game, and how narrow the margins of difference are at the highest levels of competition.

There are those who will point out that in both the Ladies' and Gentlemen's draw the winner did not face the best players in the world. Federer did not face Nadal, Murray or Djokovic, and Muguruza did not face Serena Williams. True enough, but they did beat every player they faced and that is how championships are won. You cannot defeat someone you do not play for whatever reason, and both Muguruza and Federer earned their titles in the same way titles are always won. On the court.

Some will argue that the 2017 Wimbledon fortnight was not up to previous standards for either drama or level of play. Maybe not, but still it was Wimbledon and that was good enough for me.

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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