

*Musings on the Qualies
and the 2009 US Open*

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It was back in the summer of 1956, I think, when I first learned about the US Open's Qualifying Tournament. Except it wasn't called The Open back then, just the National Championships. There were very few pro players at the time – you had to be an amateur to compete in the Championships. But Pancho Gonzalez, Frank Sedgman, and Pancho Segura were three big names who played with Jack Kramer in his new group of touring pros, and they came to Dallas from time to time. I was fifteen and a rising sophomore in high school, trying to make the tennis team with Bill Proctor and Billy Lewis, two of my closest friends and best hitting partners. We were ball kids for Kramer.

Football has always been big in Texas, then as now. Three years earlier, as a seventh-grader at Thomas J. Rusk Junior High, I tried out for the football team. I was quick and light, so when they asked me what position I wanted to play, I asked what players the cheerleaders went for. Halfback, they said. Wearing a pair of old shoulder pads and a leather helmet, I ran one play from scrimmage – a straight shot through the line – where I was hammered by a pair of beefy older kids who gave me a mild concussion and a bloody nose. So I started looking around for a less dangerous sport. By modern standards, it was a little late to learn tennis. You want to be really good, you start at six.

With help from our hitting coach, Leo LaBorde, who would be inducted into the Texas Tennis Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 1983, the two Bills and I practiced six hours a day in Dallas that hot summer – three every morning and three each afternoon – when the temperatures seldom dropped below a searing hundred degrees. Two of us would take one court while the other hit with Leo for an hour on an adjoining court, and we would rotate with him throughout the day. Mike Amis was another mate of ours. He was an exceptionally gifted player, highly ranked in Dallas, and played first singles on our team. But he was so talented he rarely practiced (think McEnroe), so we never saw him on the practice courts.

Occupying a third court nearby was an older player in his twenties, a stocky guy with boundless energy and textbook strokes named Bruce Barnes. Like us, he spent six hours practicing every day too, but he had much loftier goals in mind: competing in the Texas Open, in Austin, in late July. If he did well, he'd have a chance to compete in the qualifying tournament for the National Championships. Turned out he went pretty deep at the Texas Open, got into the Qualies, and managed to earn a qualifying slot in the first round of the Championships. Where he promptly lost.

We all used the standard racquet of the day, a Jack Kramer Autograph Wilson woodie. Compared to current racquets, it was heavy (about 15 ounces) with a head size of only about 68 square inches (~95 is standard on the tour today). Instead of being fabricated from space-age materials like carbon fiber or composites of graphite, Kevlar, fiberglass, titanium or boron, it was made by laminating seven strips of wood – five of maple and two of ash. None of us could afford gut strings; consequently, we played with nylon filament, which wore out pretty fast. The JKA was, and still is, Wilson's best-selling racquet of all time: more than 10 million of them were sold between 1948, when it debuted, to 1979, when it was finally put to rest. Pete Sampras said recently that when his son is ready to play, he'll learn his strokes with a Wilson Kramer too, just like Dad did in the 1970s.

The decade of the 1950s was well before the time, 20 years later, when the baby boom generation would popularize tennis and create a boomlet in court construction, racquets, and balls. In the 1950s, in Texas anyway, mostly girls played tennis. None of our male teachers would be caught dead coaching the boys' tennis team, so we got passed down to Miss Buchanan, the girls PE instructor and sometime ballet coach, who drove us to our matches with the city's other high schools. We did all

right. I made the team, splitting time between singles and doubles (which I never much cared for, then or now), but we all languished in Amis's shadow. I'm sure Andy Roddick has on more than one occasion wondered how different his tennis career might have been without Roger Federer. Or Lendl without McEnroe or Agassi without Sampras. Such is tennis history.

Well, Bruce Barnes produced the same results in each of the next two years when we practiced on neighboring courts: grind out long sessions in the devil's heat; qualify for the Texas Open; do well enough to enter the Qualies; make it through and into the main draw for the Championships; lose in the opening round. We gave him the nickname Sisyphus. Each of us would have been happy to have been good enough just to be his hitting partner one day on the practice courts. Inducted into the Texas Tennis Hall of Fame in 1981, he remains a model to this day, even though he never achieved the results – or the fame – of two other popular and more prominent Texans of the time, Cliff Richey and Chuck McKinley. But I'll never forget his focus on the Qualies.

Relatively few people know about the Qualies. They're scheduled every year the week before the Open itself begins. There's no admission fee – it's absolutely free – unlike other Grand Slam qualifying tournaments like the French Open at Roland Garros, in Paris, where the price to watch 128 men and 128 women compete for sixteen slots each in the main draw is nearly \$30.- a day; it was €18.- when I was in Paris this year – about \$25.-. Qualifying is held at the National Tennis Center in Corona, Queens, on the same courts where the Open is played the following two weeks.

Because the number of spectators at the Qualies is quite small, it's easy to find a courtside seat on the outer courts, where you can watch up-and-coming young men and women from all over the world battle it out for one of their sixteen qualifying spots. To do this, they have to win three matches in four days – Tuesday through Friday – and the quality of tennis is often every bit as compelling as in the Open itself. Occasionally, when a veteran tour player's ranking falls below the level necessary to gain automatic entry into the main draw (typically ~100), you'll see them competing for the Q-slots too, as Jonas Bjorkman of Sweden, one of the world's top doubles players but less successful in singles, and Arnaud Clement of France had to do last year. Both in their mid-thirties, they made it through qualifying but lost in early rounds of the Open: Bjorkman in the first, Clement in the second. They each announced their retirement from Grand Slam singles competition earlier this year.

Competitors for the Qualies are selected by procedures similar to those for the Open itself. With a draw of 128, 98 players are selected by the USTA in order from the most recent International Standing List of the division of the event; a select few from the top 200 on the same list; ~4-8 by Wild Card; and occasionally even a preliminary qualifying round to determine the final entrants. Seeds – the top 32 players in each draw – are determined in order of points earned on the Satellite Tour, typically the Futures series of tournaments held frequently in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. The global supply of gifted and talented young players is as surprising as it is large. There are more players like Mike Amis and Bruce Barnes around today than ever before.

This year the first half of the first round of the Qualies took place on Tuesday, August 25th – 32 men's and 32 women's matches on the same day – followed by the bottom half of the opening round the following day. The second round (the semifinals) was held on Thursday the 27th, and the third round (the finals) on Friday, the 28th. (Rain pushed the final round to Sunday the 30th.) The Open began Monday the 31st and concluded (after two days of rain) with the men's final a day late on Monday, September 14th, mirroring last year's final, when remnants of tropical storm Hannah postponed it from Sunday to Monday as well. Arguably the most memorable one-day delay for the men's final occurred in '89, when Ivan Lendl battled Mats Wilander for the singles title on a Monday too. The match went five full sets, took more than five hours to complete, and forced fellow Texan Dan Rather out of his studio at CBS Evening News because the Open refused to break at 7pm to let him blather. So he walked off in a famous huff. Thank you, thank you, USTA.

Tuesday, August 25th

Let the *hajj* begin. It was hot and humid the whole day, typical for late August. I arrived early, as I normally do, to watch a few practice sessions before the matches. The timing was fortunate because the Open security staff had decided to test a new procedure designed to limit items spectators were allowed to bring in: no food from home this year, they said, and no bottled water. There was a near-riot at the East Gate.

I refused to toss out half a homemade chicken salad sandwich and empty two 1-liter bottles of mineral water, asking instead to see a security supervisor. He came out wringing his hands, nervously explaining that the new procedures were being implemented because of the Great Recession, to give Open concessionaires more business. Twelve-dollar hamburgers and half-liter bottles of designer water at \$5.- a pop have never been my idea of pleasure; in more than 25 years of annual pilgrimage, I've never been turned away for schlepping in food or water. (Bags are another issue: after 9/11, backpacks and knapsacks were banned – too many pockets and zippered compartments to search – and only soft coolers and specific handbags have been allowed.)

I argued with the supervisor, an unfortunate rookie named Ralph, saying that the US Tennis Association could be sued for restraint of trade. What's more, I said, the recession was arguably hitting spectators harder than it was the concessionaires anyway. He relented for the crowd that day but warned us not to bring in food or water the next day. (There was no mention of this new protocol either on the USTA Website or in its monthly publication, *Tennis Magazine*, or on any of the placards posted prominently at the East Gate listing acceptable and unacceptable items.)

There was some discussion of exceptions made for medical reasons; I later phoned Marc Schwarzman, my urologist, and asked him to sign a note stating that I was a patient being treated for kidney stones (true in 1998) and that my water contained medication designed to dissolve them (not true, but who cares). The note turned out to be superfluous. Security decided the following day that a policy that was unmanageable with a few dozen people on the first day of the Qualies would be catastrophic with a half-million spectators during the next two weeks. The Open staff is not new to such unpredictable behavior. (As it turned out, fortunately for all concerned, none of this procedural folderol occurred during the Open itself.)

The first women's singles match I watched was a matchup between Yulia Fedossova of France and the American Alison Riske on court 11. This is a favored outer court because it has baseline seating, far and away the best vantage point from which to watch and the reason TV cameras are positioned there. (Other than the show courts – Ashe, Armstrong Stadium, and the Grandstand), only courts 10, 11, and 13 offer baseline seating.) On the other outer courts, the seats are only along the sidelines; some, like courts 4 and 7, have abundant sideline seating, while others, including 10, 11, and 13, have fewer sideline seats. They're a great place to sit if you want to take home a case of cervical spondylosis as a souvenir – a stiff neck that results from repetitive motion caused by oscillating the head back and forth all day. Me, I head straight for the baselines.

Alison Riske just graduated from high school in McMurray, Pennsylvania, this year and will play her collegiate tennis at Vanderbilt. She seems like an American version of Elena Dementieva; hits hard ground strokes from the baseline, is quick and even-tempered. Today she wore an Adidas pink outfit with vertical stripes that looked like a prison uniform from a road gang in the Deep South. She was also wearing a nipple-suppressing bra that produced just the right amount of jiggle. But neither Dementieva nor Victoria's Secret were enough to get her through to the second round: she lost in three sets to Fedossova, who broke Riske six times and won 5-7, 6-4, 6-2. (You can view a short video on the Guinness World Record for unhooking bra straps – set in London – if you like, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F84ZtfpSuYM>.) Fedossova is a tall, rangy 21-year-old baseline banger who's ranked 197 in the world; her best results to date have been to make the second round

of qualifying at the US Open and at Roland Garros (she would lose in the second round here this year, too). She had more winners than errors today but she turned the small crowd against her by making too many complaints to the chair umpire about the quality of line calls, a common affliction.

The HawkEye challenge system is up and running on the three main show courts – Ashe, Armstrong, and (new this year) the Grandstand – as it is at all Grand Slams. But not on any of the outer courts. The system has by and large been embraced by the players, with a few exceptions (notably Roger Federer himself, who finds it quirky); they get three line-call challenges per set and one extra in a tiebreaker. (Through the semis of this year's Open, more than 500 challenges would be made, with a success rate of only 27%.) The system could be expanded in the future by installing the multiple cameras, the motion-detection software, and just one large LCD screen instead of two at the north end of courts 10, 11, and 13. Not only do these courts have baseline seating, they're also on the perimeter of the Open grounds. Erecting one screen above the far baselines would blend in with the tall trees there and not mar the Open's overall aesthetics. But money is a significant factor – it costs ~\$300,000.- per court to install – as is fairness: if only three outer courts get the HawkEye system, then players will complain if they can't play on one of them. Adoption of the system became imperative after Serena Williams's loss to Jennifer Capriati in the quarterfinals of the '04 Open, when several critical calls late in the match were clearly in error and not overturned by the chair umpire, Mariana Alves, who was subsequently dismissed from the tournament. HawkEye is not perfect either – its accuracy is “only” 98.9% – but it's made the line judges more attentive and proficient. With some of the men's serves exceeding 140 mph and routine ground strokes now over 100, human error is predictable. HawkEye deserves a kind of Nobel Peace Prize for resolving line-call disputes.

Next up on the court 11 was a men's singles match between Michael Berrer, a 30-year-old German journeyman and the Qualies' number 10 seed, and Sam Warburg, a 26-year-old American who played at Stanford, won the Pac-10 singles championship in '04 and '05 and the NCAA doubles title in '04. Warburg has struggled since, like lots of former NCAA collegiate champions on the pro tour, and this year has been no exception. Warburg started strong, but Berrer outlasted him 3-6,6-3,7-6(3). Though showing textbook strokes, his mental toughness seemed suspect. Sampras was once asked how much of tennis was physical and how much mental. “Tennis is ninety percent mental,” Pete replied. “The other ten percent is mental.” (Quote this to someone and they may not get it: they think “physical” for the remaining ten percent. For Sampras, it was everything.) Berrer would make it through qualifying into the main draw before losing to Zaballos of Argentina in the first round.

Three years ago, in the '06 Qualies, I discovered a young German named Philipp Kohlschreiber, much impressed by the quality of his play, both mental and physical. (At 5-9 and 150 pounds, he was also easy to relate to.) I said at the time he'd go places and we'd see more of him on the pro tour. Turns out Kohli's ranking has risen steadily to 24 in the world; the 26-year-old was seeded #23 in this year's Open before losing in the 3rd round to Radek Stepanek, the #15 seed, in four). So when I settled into a baseline seat on court 13 to watch Peter Polansky of Canada play the American Alex Kuznetsov, it didn't take me long to realize that Polansky could well be another up-and-comer too.

Kuznetsov is considered a member of the “next wave” of American men like Sam Querry, John Isner and Jesse Levine (a lefty whom Federer has brought to Dubai as a hitting partner to help him train for Nadal). He moved to the US from Ukraine in 1990, when he was three, and bypassed collegiate tennis to play professionally. But his results have been disappointing. He made the first round of the Open in '06 and '07 but was lackluster last year and his current world ranking (158) meant that he had to get through the Qualies this year to make the main draw.

The 21-year-old Polansky is a Canadian citizen (his parents are Polish) and is Canada's 2nd-ranking pro after Frank Dancevic, who achieved some notoriety in '07 by beating Andy Roddick in Indianapolis to reach the finals there and earned enough points to bypass qualifying for the Open.

(Dancevic lost in the first round of the Qualies here this year.) Polansky turned pro at 18 and plays #2 singles for Canada's Davis Cup team. After winning both his singles matches against Mexico in 2006, he sleepwalked through the balcony door of his hotel room – saying later he “saw” a man attack him with a knife – landing miraculously on well-cushioned shrubs three floors below. He broke no bones but required ~400 stitches to close the gash in his left leg caused by the glass door. His coach, Dean Coburn, said at the time that he might never play tennis again, but after disciplined rehab and conditioning, he was back on the courts four months later.

I christened Polansky and Kuznetsov, both unseeded in the Qualies, the Nike Twins: they were clad in identical shirts with a turquoise diagonal stripe, heather gray shorts, black headbands, and white socks and shoes, all with the world's most readily identifiable swoosh logo. (What's more, they were about the same size, too: 5-11, ~155). What impressed me the most about Polansky was his footwork. Time after time, he would backpedal effortlessly to hit an outside-in forehand down the line for a winner. (More on footwork below in a description of Federer's round-of-sixteen match against Tommy Robredo of Spain.) If you want to see what makes good tennis pros really great watch their footwork once in a while, not just the ball.

Polansky was also cool and level-headed throughout the match with Kuznetsov: he never disputed a line call, never let his shoulders slump, kept his body language positive. By looking at his face, you couldn't tell if he was winning or losing (another Federer trait and yet another manifestation of mental toughness). He defeated the young American handily in straight sets, 7-6(3), 6-2 and would go on to win all three of his qualifying matches (the final two against seeded players) to enter the main draw of the Open, where he would lose in the first round to Garcia-Lopez of Spain in five long sets. But as with Kohli three years ago, I think we'll see a lot more of Polansky in the years to come, so watch for his name in the Qualies next summer (or in the main draw if his ranking continues to rise). You'll be rewarded with some high-quality tennis by a tactically smart, disciplined young player whose style of play is smooth and graceful yet surprisingly powerful despite his small frame.

Speaking of tactics, I wondered if we would see another Andrea Jaeger again. This young American woman came out of nowhere. She was the famous “moonballer,” the only player who purposefully took pace off the ball to hit it in ever-higher arches with uncanny accuracy and control, which drove her opponents nuts. Brad Gilbert would have loved her. She turned pro at 14, made the finals at the French at 17, in '82, and the finals of Wimbledon the following year. She made the semis at the US Open in '80 and '82, when I first saw her, and the semis at the Australian in '82 as well. Sometimes you may see the women slow the pace of play today, but nobody uses the Jaeger tactic anymore. Or the serve-and-volley tactic either, for that matter. The time is ripe. Turns out, Andrea is now in the sisterhood, working as a nun at a Catholic order in Colorado. Stranger things have happened.

On court 7, I watched a set between Michael Russell of the US, seeded 9th, and David Guez of France. Russell, now 31, may soon be a tennis geriatric with so many young competitors around. He broke into the top 100 in '07 by playing well on the Challenger Circuit, but his ranking has slipped to 118 and reduced him to qualifying again. He looks, dresses, and plays like our good friend and frequent hitting partner Brian Gibbs – check him out and see if you don't agree – <http://www.atpworldtour.com/Tennis/Players/Ru/M/Michael-Russell.aspx>. Russell defeated Guez in straights but had the misfortune of facing Polansky in the second round; Polansky eliminated him 5-7, 6-2, 6-4. That was a fairly close match marred by Russell's frequent complaints about line calls, including an important one on match point. (HawkEye on three outer courts, anyone?) But Polansky had ten aces, won 70 percent of his first-serve points, and broke Russell six times. He was clearly the superior player and, as I say, is well worth keeping an eye on.

Thursday, August 27th

For the second round of the Qualies, the weather was much the same: hot and humid. Lots of red faces on the courts, especially the Eastern Europeans who are used to much cooler, clammy climates. When we practiced in the summer heat in Dallas half a century ago, we used to wear caps made of light sponge rubber; on changeovers, we'd soak them in ice water, maybe stuff a few ice cubes under the crown and put them back on. They were great. I'm surprised there aren't more innovations like this around today. Another effective way to regulate the body's thermostat is to lay a bag of ice across the back of the neck on changeovers; you see a fair number of players doing this now, but most don't bother. Staying sufficiently hydrated is a must, however. Otherwise cramps, or worse.

A prime example of heat exhaustion could be seen during the women's match between the African-American Shenay Perry, the #24 seed, and unseeded Oksana Kalashnikova, a 19-year-old from Tbilisi, Georgia. Perry, 24, is five-seven and weighs 146 pounds; she has a pair of ITF doubles titles but hasn't done much in singles since she reached the 4th round at Wimbledon as a qualifier in '06 (she's 2-2 in singles this year). Kalashnikova, the 2005 Orange Bowl champion, has a singles record of 32-12 this year but has been unable to make the main draw in any Slam. She stands an inch or two over six feet and is pipe-thin. I could see the telltale signs of heat exhaustion as soon as I sat down: her face was red as a beet. She melted in straights under the hot sun, 6-4, 6-2. Do the Eastern Europeans not know about ice? When she picked up her mobile phone at the end of the match, I thought she might be calling 911 for a paramedic. Perry would make it through qualifying only to lose to Kateryna Bondarenko, 23, of Ukraine in the second round; another diminutive baseliner, Bondarenko would subsequently give the Argentine Gisela Dulko, ranked 40th in the world, a 6-0, 6-0 double-bagel in the fourth round to make her first quarterfinals. Kateryna is the younger sister of Alyona Bondarenko; her ranking was 57 before the Open and will almost certainly rise now.

All the players travel with their "camps" – to the Qualies as to the Open itself – parents, siblings, friends, their coach, maybe a few hangers-on. Wherever they are in a match, they look to their "box" for help – a hand signal here, a nod there, sometimes shrugged shoulders as if to say, why ask me? Shriekapova (Sharapova) is the worst offender, her father-coach the most irritating signal-caller of all, holding up a banana when it's time to eat, using finger codes to suggest different tactics. On-court coaching is prohibited, but everybody does it (except Federer, who has been coachless most of his career). There is a debate underway: should it in fact be permitted between sets? Why not?

One really compelling match on Thursday took place between Lukasz Kubot of Poland, seeded 12 in the Qualies, and Tatsuma Ito of Japan (unseeded). Ito is relatively unheralded; Japan's current tennis idol is Kei Nishikori. Last year I saw Nishikori, a qualifier, eliminate David Ferrer of Spain, the #13 seed, in the third round in a long, five-set match that left him with no fuel in the tank for his fourth-round match with Juan Martín del Potro, who won easily in straights. Nishikori, 20, has been out of competition since May with a hairline fracture of his elbow and is still in rehab; he's on a Sony scholarship at the Bollettieri Academy (now IMG) in Florida. Meanwhile, Ito draws the Japanese fans now, despite his relatively low ranking (258). He has a stout build and an ultra-serious face, perhaps reflecting the mantle temporarily acquired from Nishikori. Kubot, ranked 135, made the finals of the Serbian Open this past May (losing to Novak Djokovic in straights); he was the first Pole to reach an ATP final since Wojciech Fibak in 1983. He, too, seemed somehow burdened by tradition today.

Kubot's fans far outnumbered the Japanese in the sideline stands at court 4 by about five-to-one. On each changeover in the third set they were shouting, "Let's go, Lu-kasz, let's go." I joined the Japanese to cheer Ito on, countering with the chant, "Let's go, I-to, let's go!" I honestly couldn't see

much difference between the two, other than age; at 27, Kubot was six years older than Ito. The strongly built Japanese knocked his equally muscular Polish opponent out of the second round of the Qualies 6-2, 3-6, 6-4 to make the finals, where he would sadly lose the (rain-delayed) match to Carsten Ball, an Australian and the 27th seed, 6-3 6-2.

When I say I saw little difference between Kubot and Ito, what I mean is that they both hammered the ball endlessly from the baseline, elevating their bodies several inches off the court when they hit their arching topspins. They seemed content to engage in a battle of attrition and never came to net. There appeared to be few tactical points played (e.g., corner-to-corner with sharper and sharper angles, or a drop shot followed by a lob) and little overall strategy from either player. This style of tennis is orders-of-magnitude different from what was taught a half-century ago. First of all, we learned to hit flat balls from the baseline; this is actually an advantage today because the ball stays low when it hits the court. This drives topspin hitters mad and can push them to religious conversion. Second, we used to serve and volley much more often, not content to stick to the baseline like glue. It opened up the court and arguably made for more interesting tennis, both to play and to watch. And third, when you watch recordings of classical tennis now I think you can see points evolve more clearly along tactical lines. Everybody (with few exceptions) plays the game the same today, as if the only tool in their box is a hammer. Gone are classical serve-and-volley players like Sampras and Edberg and Rafter and Cash (today's sole exception: Taylor Dent). Here's hoping it makes more of a comeback while we're all still around to enjoy it. At some point, a player is sure to emerge to make this happen (it arguably won't be Dent, who's troubled by serious back problems). But it's certain to come and when it does, tennis will be all the better for it.

Few of you may have ever heard of Mel Purcell. He came to the Open as a 20-year-old in 1980, when I first saw him on the Grandstand court. He never made it past the third round here, which he did three times, but he did make the fourth round at the French in '81 and '82 and the quarters at Wimbledon in '83. Purcell was a top-20 touring pro by the mid-80s, but what I remember most about this kid at the Open was his nifty contrarian attitude with regard to lobs. After he lobbed, he would occasionally *rush the net* in an attempt to throw his opponent off, and you know what? It worked for him more often than not. I tried this tactic a few times, too, but I seem to have won more black-and-blue spots on my torso than I ever did points.

I had never heard of Thomaz Bellucci of Brazil before the Qualies this year but I figured I should check out the 21-year-old lefty; he was, after all, the #1 seed. Ranked 69 in the world, he has had some pretty successful runs in Challenger and Futures events in Latin America during the past couple of years. He also plays Davis Cup for Brazil. (His parents, both businesspeople, emigrated from Italy). His opponent was Grigor Dimitrov, 18, from Bulgaria; he won the '08 Wimbledon junior title but was unseeded in the Qualies. After watching them hammer the ball in long baseline rallies too, I could see why Bellucci had the highest seed. At 6-2 180, he has a huge serve but moves nimbly for a big guy – great footwork, good finesse, solid fundamentals. He reminded me of a left-handed Djokovich, currently world number four, by his frame as well as by his style of play (see <http://www.atpworldtour.com/Tennis/Players/Top-Players/Thomaz-Bellucci.aspx>). He was pretty intimidating, mowing down the Bulgarian in straights 6-2, 6-4. Dimitrov suffered the ultimate humiliation: double-faulting to end the match. I have added Bellucci to my short list of players to watch (à la Peter Polansky) – Kohlschreiber potential for sure. He would go on to win his third and final qualifying match to enter the main draw, where he defeated his first-round opponent Yen-Hsun Lu of Taiwan in straights sets as well, 6-4, 6-2, 6-3. His reward was to meet Gilles Simon of France, the #9 seed, in the second round, about which more below.

There were two women I wanted to see in the second round of the Qualies today – Neuza Silva of Portugal, who played Pauline Parmentier of France, the #9 seed, and Karolina Sprem of Croatia, seeded #14, playing Valerie Tetreault of Canada. Silva is 26, currently ranked 133, has a 16-6 record

in Fed Cup matches, and made it through Wimbledon qualifying this summer before losing to Serena Williams in straights in the first round. But she's a spunky player with a ton of energy; unfortunately, not enough to defeat Parmentier, who won easily 6-1, 6-2. This would be Parmentier's last match; she lost to Shenay Perry, the #24 seed, in the finals.

Karolina Sprem, you may recall, beat Venus Williams in the second round at Wimbledon in '04 at age 19; this was the famous -- some might say bizarre -- match during which the chair umpire awarded her a gratuitous point during the second set tiebreak without missing a beat (and was dismissed by Wimbledon officials immediately afterward). I first saw Sprem at the Open the following year, wanting to watch her up close, see what potential she might have at age 20. Not a lot, I discovered. She lost her first round match in straights and her most distinguishing characteristic, as far as I could tell, was her distinct lack of passion. Small and lithe at 5-8 130, she had shown considerable passion and energy at Wimbledon but was flat as a pancake at the Open. Now, four years later, despite having won several ITF-level singles events but nothing on the WTA tour, here she was ranked ~185 and is back to qualifying. (In fairness, she missed most of 2008 with an elbow injury: Dan, please note.) Tetreault, 21, her Canadian (I should say Quebecois) opponent was unseeded in the qualies and had only two WTA matches under her belt so far, with a record of 0-2. Still, she handled Sprem rather easily in two loose sets, 6-4, 6-2. (Spre had needed three long sets to defeat her first-round opponent, the unseeded Russian Nina Bratchkova.) Tetreault would get through qualifying by defeating the #27 seed, American Angela Haynes, in the final. But she would lose to her first-round opponent in the main draw, Magdalena Rybarikova of Slovakia 6-0, 2-6, 6-2 < sigh >. She seemed to blow hot and cold; maybe it was nerves, perhaps inadequate coaching, but I have a hunch it may be a while before we see much more of her.

Another women's match I was eager to see was on court 7 between two Japanese players: Kimiko Date Krumm, the oldest in the Qualies at 39, pitted against Yurika Sema, 22, ranked 170. I had followed Kimiko Date often in the past when she was a top player. She reached the semis of the Australian in '94, the semis of the French in '95, the semis of Wimbledon in '96, and the quarters of the US Open in both '93 and '94. A gritty baseliner, she had the uncanny ability of being able to dissect an opponent's strategy fairly readily and rose to number 33 in the world by '96 when she suddenly and inexplicably announced her retirement after the Atlanta Olympics. She married the German race car driver Michael Krumm early last year, promptly announced she was returning to the tour at age 37 and was awarded a Wild Card at Wimbledon. She lost in three sets in the first round to Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark, seeded #9 there and again here at the Open, where she would make the quarterfinals to play America's newest sweetheart, Melanie Oudin (about whom much more below).

Long story short, Sema defeated Date Krumm in three, 7-6(5), 3-6, 6-4, the match in doubt until a service break in the third. Both players seemed hesitant (nerves?), both played the same baseline game (what else); Sema, up 5-4 and serving in the first set, couldn't close it out. Maybe it was her wide-body Yonex, who knows. As the great American player Bill Tilden used to say, you want to win you got to play the big points and the big games better. The stats showed how close this match really was: six service breaks by each player, each winning half their first-serve points and half their receiving points. They won exactly 96 points each. Sema was lucky she survived. She got through qualifying to enter the main draw, where she promptly lost to Anna Chakvatadze of Russia 6-0, 6-4. I doubt we'll see much of her in the future either, and Kimiko may soon be say sayonara to tennis yet again.

These journeymen and journeywomen live stressful lives. Average earnings on the Challenger tour is only about \$50,000 a year. They barely break even, considering the costs of travel, accommodations, a coach, and hitting partners. The late novelist David Foster Wallace wrote a long article on tennis for the July 1996 issue of *Esquire* magazine titled "The String Theory." It's a terrific piece about what

happens when all of a man's intelligence and athleticism is focused on hitting a fuzzy yellow ball where his opponent is not. Critics called it an "obsessive inquiry (with footnotes), into the physics and metaphysics of tennis." You can find it at <http://www.esquire.com/features/sports/the-string-theory-0796>. Wallace, whose best (and longest, at a thousand pages, with footnotes) is arguably *Infinite Jest*, also wrote a long piece about Roger Federer in *The New York Times* Sunday Magazine on August 20, 2006, titled "Federer as Religious Experience." Wallace was a highly-ranked junior himself as a teenager and continued his interest in tennis to the end. Sadly, he lost a long battle with bipolar disorder, dying by his own hand late last year. You can find *The New York Times* article at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/sports/playmagazine/20federer.html?pagewanted=all>.

The best match in the second round of the Qualies was between the 31-year-old American Michael Russell and my new best friend, Peter Polansky of Canada. Russell took it to three sets before the younger Canadian pulled away 5-7, 6-2, 6-4. The key to the match was a 24-minute fourth game in the third set, which Polansky won to pull ahead 3-1 and up a critical break. Russell was consistently missing on down-the-line forehands, which prompted the obvious question: why did he keep hitting them? Maybe he never read Bill Tilden either. Tilden's best-known aphorism was, "Never change a winning game. *Always* change a losing game." Russell's footwork seemed more sluggish today than in his first-round match against Duez of France; could it have been age, he asked rhetorically? Russell also contested a bushel basketful of line calls during the 2-1/2 hour match. Message to Michael: no challenges on the outer courts, guy. Maybe that's what threw his serve off. Polansky won 70% of his first-serve points, Russell barely half. The match ended, predictably, on a final line-call complaint from Russell. (Hey, Michael: get with the program.) Not reflected in the post-match statistics was the fact that Polansky went through six shirts in three sets. (Scores and stats for all completed matches at the Open, including the Qualies, are readily available at http://www.usopen.org/en_US/scores/cmatch/index.html?promo=topnav.) Didn't I say keep an eye on Polansky? Maybe his ranking will rise steadily and he'll make it straight to the main draw next year, but even if he has to qualify again, I want to watch him play. Can't wait; he's fun.

Twenty-five of the 128 women entered in the qualifying draw this year – one out of five – were "ovas" from Russia and Eastern Europe. You can find them on the Open Website at http://www.usopen.org/en_US/scores/draws/ws/wsdraw.pdf. I won't list them all here (big sigh of relief), but my favorites by far were the double-barrelled Barbora Zahlavova-Strycova of the Czech Republic, the #12 seed, and Ekaterina Bychkova (great name) of Russia. Bychkova lost in the first qualifying round, but Zahlavova-Strycova won all her Qualie matches and made it through to the second round of the main draw where she faced Victoria Azarenka, the #12 seed, who won in straights, 6-2, 6-1. Azarenka would in turn get knocked out in the third round by Francesca Schiavone of Italy, the #26 seed, in three sets. Seeded women would be ejected from the Open this year like factory seconds that couldn't pass quality control – keep reading. Anyway, of the 25 -ovas only three made it through qualifying – a success rate of barely 12 percent. I was thinking the name might carry an advantage, but the stats suggest otherwise. Ova and out.

After watching the second round of qualifying, even a blind person could tell (from the steady *thwack*) that tennis has evolved into a war of attrition: everybody hits from the baseline with mind-numbing, metronomic ground strokes. The players have become android robots, incapable of hitting sharp angles, short balls, or volleys. *What are they thinking out there?* My hunch is that there's a huge opportunity for a smart coach (or two) who understands the limitations of baseline ball-blasting and can coach their players to embrace the full-court game and to vary their tactics. In order to do this, they'll have to put their most underused muscle to work: the brain. The physical side of the game is obvious; the mental, in total absentia. Perhaps the Roman philosopher and skeptic Sextus Empiricus was right. "There may be no truth," he wrote in ~200 AD, "only moments of clarity passing for answers." The moments of clarity in tennis are rare: a dropshot winner, a surprise volley, a successful lob. *Hello?*

Trekking to the Qualies and to the Open every year brings back a flood of memories from my own experience playing overseas. I joined the Hong Kong Cricket Club when we lived there in the early 1970s so I could play on grass. The HKCC lined six tennis courts on the turf in the off-season, which was pretty much the whole year at the time. Easy on the legs, perfect for serve and volley, a supreme pleasure. In Tokyo, I played at the Tokyo Lawn Tennis Club, once with Prince Akihito (who became Emperor in 1989 to inaugurate the current Heisei era). My hitting partners and I used play at 6:30am on many weekdays, before work. (Weekends the Club was pretty crowded, but early birds still got a court.) Japan's tennis season is 10 months long, given the mild climate between March and December. There is no daylight savings in Japan, so sunrise is about 4:30am. The TLTC courts were crafted out of brown dirt, which was faster than red clay but slower than hard courts and impeccably maintained. Later, in Düsseldorf, I played at the Blau-Schwarz (Blue-Black) Club, the only place I've ever had to audition before being admitted. Germans rarely do anything for fun: the Blau-Schwarz admissions committee sat on the Clubhouse balcony one Saturday morning as I hit with their pro, all the better to evaluate the *Americaner*. I only remember making an ungodly number of unforced errors, but the test was on red clay (think Roland Garros), the slowest in captivity and (for me) the least fun. Somehow I passed. It was there that I learned to play with damp balls, heavy with grit. There always seemed to be a constant drizzle in northern Europe. No rising sun there.

I had intended to return on Friday the 28th for the finals but rain intervened, cancelling the matches. Some of them were played Saturday the 29th (my birthday), some on Sunday the 30th, some in the USTA's new 8-court indoor facility on the grounds, which has no spectator seating. I played indoors myself that weekend and waited for the opening round matches to start on Monday. The outlook for the first ten days of the Open was brilliant, confirmed at www.weather.com by searching the site for Zip 11368 (Flushing Meadows, Corona, Queens): cool nights, comfortable days, limitless sunshine.

Tuesday, September 1st

First round, day two. It takes three days to complete first-round matches, which is understandable with 128 men and 128 women in the main draw. I see Andy Murray will play the Latvian Ernests Gulbis tonight (Murray would win in straights, 7-5, 6-3, 7-5), which I won't be able to watch because the day session will still be going strong.) Gulbis is a promising and impressive player (his sister is a world-class professional golfer), but he's been unable to penetrate any of the Grand Slams deeply, losing in the early rounds. This is curious, to say the least. He moved to Munich at 12 to train with the former pro Niki Pilic – the same coach and the same school where Novak Djokovic, two years Gulbis's senior, was in training. The irony is that Gulbis used to beat Djokovic regularly in junior events but Djokovic has left him in the dust since they both joined the ATP tour. Their rivalry is not unlike that between Federer and David Nalbandian, Argentina's #1 player (out for several months with a hip injury), who defeated Federer to win the junior titles at both the US Open and Wimbledon. Since then, Federer has left *him* in the dust. Over time, Nalbandian's ranking has gradually dropped lower than his trademark ponytail.

But today is a quadrafecta, if there is such a thing: four outstanding matches on the Grandstand Court, starting with the #7 seed Jo-Wilfried Tsonga playing Chase Buchanan, an 18-year-old Wild Card recipient about to begin his sophomore year at Ohio State. Tsonga's mother is French, his father Congolese. At 6-2 210, he more nearly resembles a linebacker than a world-class tennis player, but he moves well for a big man and his speed is deceptive. He dispatched Nadal in the semis of the Australian Open last year and more recently beat Federer in a bizarre match in Montreal this summer with Federer up 5-1 in the third. Tsonga has a strange serve. He doesn't grip his racquet near the butt-end, but rather higher up the handle. Novices are taught to grip it near the butt with just the last three fingers, which generate the powerful wrist-snap that creates racquet head speed that dictates pace. And he starts his service motion without dropping the racquet down, as most players

do; rather, he seems to be content to “push” it up. But he served well and gave Buchanan a tactical clinic, winning in straights -0, -1, and -2.

Whether nerves or youth or both, Buchanan hugged the center-court line on his approaches to net (a flaw many share). The mantra of course is “follow the ball,” but instinct somehow draws pros and ordinary mortals alike up the center line like a magnet. Pros today have trainers who focus on the mental game and specialize in developing “mental toughness.” In my day, there were none; 50 years ago, even physical conditioning was haphazard. Running for a half-hour before and after practice was the standard then. But tennis is not a purely aerobic sport, like track and field, and you never just run on the court; it’s a constant process of stopping and starting. Eventually, conditioning gave rise to hundred-meter sprints followed by a power walk for a like distance, and plyometrics.

Plyometrics training involves movements to toughen tissues and train nerve cells to stimulate a specific pattern of muscle contraction so the muscle generates as strong a contraction as possible in the shortest amount of time. A plyometric contraction thus involves first a rapid muscle lengthening movement, followed by a short resting phase, then an explosive muscle shortening movement, which enables muscles to work together in doing the specific motion. Plyometric training engages what’s called the myostatic-reflex – the automatic contraction of muscles when their stretch nerve receptors are stimulated. Today most pros do these exercises – former #1 Justine Henin, trained by master guru Pat Etcheberry until her recent retirement, was probably the most passionate about them – and you typically see players zig and zag through a series of plyometrics routines as they come onto court to play.

Buchanan showed good shot selection (a drop shot here, a well-placed volley there), but not always good execution. The young American repeatedly rushed the net on crosscourt approaches, a no-no every rookie understands: textbook is down the line, and for good reason – to cut off one of the passing lanes. The points were relatively short and the first set was over in 24 minutes; Tsonga had nine winners to three unforced errors, Buchanan the reverse: 4 winners, 12 UFEs.

I miss Carlos Moya. The former world #1 was runner-up at the Australian in ‘97 (to Sampras) and won the French in ‘98 (beating fellow Spaniard Alex Corretja). He recently retired from singles competition at age 33. Though a clay-court specialist, he played all surfaces well, including the Deco-Turf II hard courts at the Open. He was a fighter, a born counterpuncher who never gave up. Ever. He was also one of the best-conditioned players on tour. Over the years, particularly in the early rounds until being dispatched by more powerful players later, Moya played some of the most entertaining and competitive Open matches I’ve had the pleasure to watch. He would routinely run opponents corner-to-corner with searing ground strokes, then bring them to net with a well-disguised drop shot and lob over their heads when they raced forward, tongues hanging out, feebly retrieving the drop but then unable to change direction and run down the lob. His kick serve, so effective on clay, had a good bite on the Open courts too; he was a perennial crowd favorite.

The second set between Tsonga and Buchanan lasted all of 34 minutes and had a highly amusing *divertissement*. Buchanan challenged a line call – the Grandstand has the HawkEye slo-mo motion-detection software system newly installed this year, so it’s now on a par with Ashe and Armstrong, the Open’s two main show courts. Each player gets three challenges a set; if they’re right, and HawkEye overrules the call, they’re not charged. If they’re wrong, they lose a challenge. (When a tiebreak is played at 6-all, each player receives an extra challenge.) Buchanan challenged, but lost: HawkEye confirmed the call was correct. The kid couldn’t believe it. He challenged the software system. “No way!” he shouted. The chair umpire simply smiled and shook his head. “Can’t do that,” he said. The third and final set was over in 23 minutes. Buchanan will go back to school this month with a few anecdotes for his mates (not least the system challenge). If he matures, and avoids injury, I have a hunch we may see more of him in the years to come. But he gets only one Wild

Card; the USTA can award up to eight for the Open. Next year he'll probably have to play in the Qualies, and I can't wait to see how much he's improved by then.

Next up on the Grandstand was Melanie Oudin, the 17-year-old *wunderkind* from Marietta, Georgia, who made big headlines this summer by advancing to the fourth round at Wimbledon, dispatching Jelena Jankovich, a former world #1, in the third round in three sets. They had never played each other before. Jankovich, whose nickname is the Drama Queen because, as sweet as she is, she always seems to find something to whine about – injuries, dizziness, “female issues,” whatever. In her post-match interview, she cattily commented that she couldn't understand how her opponent had won because “she didn't have much of a game.” I watched their match on a high-resolution display. Not much of a game? Only a junior in high school – home-schooled, she'll “graduate” next spring – Oudin showed a dogged persistence, a fighter's spirit, a bulldog tenacity, true grit – attributes most of the veteran women on tour, excepting the Williams sisters, seem to lack. Think Jimmy Connors as a young woman (save for showboating or profanities). She's tactically smart and plays a defensive, counterpunching game, like Moya or, now, Lleyton Hewitt on the men's side. She is currently ranked 67th in the world and the second-ranking American after the Williams sisters (Shriekapova plays Fed Cup for Russia). Because her ranking shot up after her performance at Wimbledon, she was able to bypass the Qualies to earn an automatic slot in the main draw.

Her opponent was Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova of Russia, only a year her senior but with a much fancier pedigree: she won the '06 Australian Open juniors title and defended it in '07, too, when she won the US Open juniors. Currently ranked #36, well above Oudin, she has won five ITF titles already and has career earnings of more than \$500,000.- Today she played like #136 and lost to the young American in straights, 6-1, 6-2. It was the fourth game of the first set before Pavlyuchenkova had won her first point. The rallies were long and extended, which suited Oudin's style. Strangely, the Russian never changed tactics, seeming content just to bang balls from the baseline without ever giving her opponent a different look. It bears repeating: Bill Tilden, who won seven US Open titles in the 1920s, six consecutively (both records) and was the best American player for a generation, used to say, “Never change a winning game. *Always* change a losing game.” Relatively few of the pros today, Pavlyuchenkova included, seem to give this wisdom much currency.

Well, if they're not going to change their tactics, they typically do the next best thing: stall for time. Even though they're not injured, they call for the trainer and get a 5-minute timeout while their opponent, who's leading, has to sit or stand around and cool down. Some extend the trainer timeout into a medical timeout, thus buying more time. Unless there's clear evidence of injury, the chair umpire shouldn't allow such amateur theatrics. It's not all about physical conditioning; these pros are content to stay on court for hours and slug baseline bullets. But the mental game is missing. The only muscle that remains undertrained is the brain.

In the first set, Oudin had 8 winners with only 4 unforced errors. The Russian's stats were terrible: 2 winners, 18 UFEs. Oudin served tactically very well, especially into the ad court, where she often forced a weak return that she followed with a drop shot into the opposite forecourt for a winner, out of reach, trapping her opponent on the far baseline. She did this several times, with repeated success. It took her a long time to close out the match on her serve, however – the final game went to deuce five times – but she finally won on (yes) another unforced error. Her ground strokes seem flawless, and because she is small – 5-6, 130 – she's got a low center of gravity that helps her get down really low when she strikes the ball. Elena Dementieva, the #4 seed, comes to mind the same way. And, as luck would have it, Oudin's reward for winning the first round was a second-round matchup with Dementieva. *That* will be something to watch.

And it was. Dementieva was having such a dominant summer on hard courts, she looked hard to beat; I picked her to reach the finals and win. That was before she played Oudin, however, who

stunned her in their second-round match in three sets. A similar pattern prevailed when Oudin defeated Maria Sharapova, the #29 seed, in the third round, and Nadia Petrova, the #14 seed in the fourth, both also in three. Four Russians in four rounds, the last three by dropping the first set but holding strong to win. Despite losing in the quarters to Caroline Wozniacki, the #9 seed, in straights, she's on a roll. Her grit could become the stuff of legend; she never gives up, and her defensive game is second to none. You'd have to go back a decade to '97, when the Williams sisters broke through, or longer – 30 years, to 16-year-old Tracy Austin's first title – to feel the kind of buzz Oudin was creating. Like Dementieva though, she needs to develop a more powerful serve and better consistency, but she's both inspiring and entertaining to watch. With Justin Henin now rumored to make a comeback too, following the example set by Kim Clijsters, the coming year could be awesome for women's tennis, especially after Serena's meltdown in the semis. Omens, anyone?

Next up on the Grandstand was the 6-6 Marin Cilic, 20, of Serbia, seeded #16 (and ranked #15) against the 6-5 Ryan Sweeting, a 22-year-old American who won the US Open junior title in '05 and attended the University of Florida for a year before turning pro in '07. He was also the beneficiary of one of the USTA's Wild Cards this year and wears a black baseball cap backward, Hewitt-style. (It didn't help.) Cilic won ATP titles this year in Shanghai and Dubai. Sweeting has none, though he and his doubles partner, another rising young American named Jesse Levine (who won his first-round match today, defeating #27 seed Igor Andreev, a 26-year-old from Moscow) reached the finals of the US Clay Court Championships in Houston before losing to Mike & Bob Bryan, the famous twins who are en route to becoming the most successful doubles players in tennis history. They need eight more to overtake Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde, the now-retired Aussie duo who combined for an amazing 61 doubles titles during their career. (Alas, Bob & Mike would lose in the semis to the #4 seeds, Leander Paes and Lukas Dlouhy, in three.)

Possessed of a long stride with clunky steps, Cilic runs like a giraffe. He also seems susceptible to brain farts: when he gets a short ball he often doesn't know what to do with it, so addicted is he to hitting out from the baseline. Sweeting's game is all about power; his foot speed is deceptive, but I had the impression he would rather end a rally with a highlight reel shot rather than wearing his opponent down and waiting for a more strategic opening. They engaged in lots of long rallies; I simply could not understand why neither one of them, given their height, their wingspan and the fast pop on their serves, never tried to serve and volley. Sampras, the game's last great serve-and-volleyer, has often remarked that this tactic is the best way to beat Roger Federer. He and the Fed teamed up for a pair of exhibition matches in Asia last fall, and Sampras, nearly forty, won one of them, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Not content to talk the talk, he let his tennis speak loudest: he could always walk the walk with the best.

Cilic prevailed in a long three-set match that lasted nearly three hours, 7-6(2), 6-4, 7-6(4). But even after clinching victory, he didn't smile. Russian and Eastern European players are, with few exceptions, dour, hapless competitors. They rarely smile, as if luck is always against them. Nothing ever goes their way, they seem to say. Their negative body language is perhaps understandable, given that they come from cold, rainy, gray, dreary, cloud-covered climates. Still, at an early age most of them move to Spain or Florida to train, where the sunny climate is certainly more conducive to positive spirits. Maybe it's being away from their parents at such a young age, like British brats sent back to boarding school in England by parents who lived abroad in the days of Empire (or later, the Commonwealth). Cilic's numbers were just okay – 39 winners with 37 unforced errors – which was enough to prevail over Sweeting, who had only 27 winners against 41 UFEs. You can't win matches making more mistakes than your opponent. This is as true on backyard courts as it is in Slams.

The last Grandstand match of the day – it was now nearly 6pm with the court entirely in shade – featured the #4 seed Elena Dementieva, the 27-year-old blonde Russian who reached the finals of both the French and the US Opens in '04 (and three other Grand Slam semifinals, most recently

Wimbledon this year, when she lost to Serena Williams in a tight, tough 3-set match). She also won the Olympic Gold in Beijing last year. Her opponent was Camille Pin, a 28-year-old French woman who has never made it past the first or second round of a Slam. She had to play the Qualies last year to earn a spot in the main draw here, where she lost in the first round. I watched her then and I saw her again this year, when she had to do it all over again. Her luck this time was no better: Lena shellacked her 6-1, 6-2. Pin may be the European female equivalent of Texan Bruce Barnes: fight to get into the qualies, win three matches, make the main draw, lose in the first round, repeat. It was nearly 7:30pm by the time the day session concluded.

Dementieva arguably has the best ground strokes on the women's tour; however, she has not always been mentally tough and her serve is her Achilles' heel (though it has gotten a lot stronger and she was smoking her serves to Pin). She is far and away the sexiest woman on the tour, too. When she's serving, and you're seated behind her, and she punctuates her serve with that trademark leg kick, her Adidas skirt flies up to reveal some very fine real estate. She has incredibly strong legs and great footwork, with impressive core movement on her ground strokes: her body moves *through* the ball instead of just swinging at it. Watch her feet, too: she takes a super-wide stance when returning serve – maybe the widest on tour – and gets very low to the court, striking through the ball with really early racquet preparation, almost as if she's swiveling her entire frame around her waist. And watch where her feet “brake”: when she finishes her forehands and backhands, her leading foot is ready to push off in anticipation of the next shot. If I were teaching tennis today, I'd use her ground strokes (with Federer's) as the Gold Standards. *The New York Times* recently showed an interactive graphic of the Fed's ground strokes, with narration. The clip is only about two minutes long but it's revelatory: at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/08/31/sports/tennis/20090831-roger-graphic.html>.

Thursday, September 3rd

The fine weather continues. Today would be a court-hopping day, unlike Tuesday. There were several compelling second-round matches to watch on the show courts as well as outside, so I started in Armstrong to see Dinara Safina, Marat's younger sister and the #1 seed, play the 28-year-old six-foot German journeywoman Kristina Barrois, unseeded but ranked #67. I had seen Barrois in the Qualies a year ago and was underwhelmed. Safina had struggled against Olivia Rogowska, a relatively unknown Australian who gained entry with a Wild Card, in her first-round match, which went three sets. Safina had to fight off several match points and her serve had been shaky. It still was today: she opened with two doubles in succession. Barrois broke her but soon followed suit, unable to close out the first set while serving at 5-4. In the ensuing tiebreak, Safina double-faulted on set point but wound up making fewer unforced errors than her opponent, winning the next two sets 6-2, 6-3. But she double-faulted a total of 15 times and was broken four times by Barrois.

I like Safina. She's a gritty competitor too and seems to do best when pitted against the top players. She has a lot of minor WTA titles but no Slams yet. Last year, at the French, she fought back against Shriekapova in the quarters to win in three, and against Kuznetsova in the semis to win in three, before wilting and losing badly to Ana Ivanovich in the final in straights. This seems to be a pattern; how long can she keep it up without winning a Slam? A while, it seems. She would lose in the third round here to another relative unknown, the Czech Petra Kvitova, serving nine double faults. The media gives Safina a hard time, which probably adds to her stress. But she can't keep it together on the court. It's crowd-pleasing, perhaps, to show emotion, but hers is mostly negative: making a sourpuss face, shaking her head in disbelief, shouting at her box. She could do worse than take a cue from the classic golfer Byron Nelson, who won 64 titles (including five majors) between 1932 and 1946. (A PGA Tour event carries his name to this day.) It was said that Nelson was so cool under pressure that if you did a transfusion using his blood, the recipient would catch pneumonia. Safina doesn't need a better hitting coach or a more effective physical trainer. She needs a shrink.

After watching Safina's first two sets, it was clear she had taken control, so I shuffled next door to the Grandstand to watch what turned out (predictably) to be the final set between Tommy Haas, the #20 seed, and Bobby Kendrick, 30, a 6-3 American journeyman ranked around #70 who has lost twice as many ATP matches as he has won and seldom makes it past the second round of a Slam. His most notable Slam achievement was at Wimbledon in '07, when he took the first two sets from Nadal before losing (yes, in the second round) in five. Both players wore their baseball caps backward, Lleyton Hewitt style. This I don't get – they can't shade their eyes from the sun, and the solid fabric locks in heat – but far be it from me to second-guess a fashion statement in tennis.

Tennis fashion has its quirks: the award for worst fashion statement must go to Nike, who created the sleeveless shirt and capri shorts for Rafa Nadal (the better to show off his musculature, they say). But the award for best innovation goes to Nike, too: the Dri-Fit shirt fabric they developed wicks away perspiration like magic, works really well. Speaking of fashion, there was a notorious case at the Open a few years ago when Ashley Harkleroad debuted a thong under her tennis skirt, making the most provocative statement to date. When she served, revealing her attractive butt cheeks, the paparazzi rushed to the baseline to capture her dual moons for the tabloids. Needless to say, the Open quickly put a stop to this. For more revealing images of scantily-clad Ashley, go to http://images.google.com/images?hl=en&q=ashley+harkleroad&um=1&ie=UTF-8&cei=9KegSs-PAYGxIAeJyFzLBg&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1. Or load Google Images and punch in her name. Her Open outfit (what there was of it) is the first image on the left, second row down. Note 1: she was also braless. Note 2: What was she *thinking*? To eclipse Anna Kournikova, perhaps? Note 3: If you run the Firefox applet called Cool Previews, all you have to do is position your cursor over the images and they will automatically magnify in size.

Haas has done well this year – he almost eliminated Federer from the French in a match that went five sets. The Fed was down two sets to none and 3-4 in the third, serving at 15-30 when he hit that memorable crosscourt forehand that seemed to jump-start his path to the finals, which he finally won. Haas made the semis at Wimbledon too by beating Cilic in five (spread over two days). He's also 6-3 but at 31, he's getting a bit long in the tooth. Still, he's a former world #2 (2002) and is very competitive, despite being susceptible to injury. At Wimbledon, in '07, while hitting practice serves before an early-round match, he stepped on a ball and severely twisted an ankle that forced his withdrawal from the tournament. I like his style of play; at least, he hits the occasional volley that breaks up the robotic baseline monotony.

Today, like most days, wasn't going Kendrick's way. Haas was already up 6-4, 6-4 and serving to stay on serve in the third. As the baseline rallies got longer, Kendrick's patience got shorter. When he made a critical unforced error in the eighth game, he smashed his racquet on the court, requiring a replacement (and a warning from the chair umpire for racquet abuse). But they stayed on serve to six-all, cueing a sudden-death third-set tiebreak.

I love the tiebreak. It makes for high drama. It was invented in 1965 by James Van Alen, who had earlier created a scoring innovation in 1955 called VASSS – the Van Alen Streamlined Scoring System – that called for a 21-point table-tennis-style final game in any set that reached 8-all: each player serving five times in succession, alternating until one of them had 21 points (with a two-point margin). VASSS was not popular, so the USTA reverted to traditional scoring in 1957, but players (and fans alike) were getting frustrated even then having to play (or watch) matches that continued endlessly into sundown. The last straw came in 1969, when Pancho Gonzalez (then 40) and Charlie Passarell played the longest five-set match in Wimbledon history up to then: lasting 5 hours and 12 minutes, it took place over two days. Gonzalez won 22-24, 1-6, 16-14, 6-3, 11-9, winning all seven match points Passarell had against him. The (new) tiebreak system was introduced the following year. The Australian Open and Wimbledon use the tiebreak only for the first four sets (first two sets

for women); the final set is played out (as at this year's Wimbledon, when Federer beat Roddick 16-14 in the fifth). Both the French and US Opens play the best of five (three) tiebreak sets.

Kendrick seemed to run out of gas and spirits in the tiebreak. His shoulders slumped, he had a scowl on his face, and he (almost) smashed his racquet again once or twice. Sensing Kendrick's frustration, Haas kept his cool and won the tiebreak easily, 7-3.

With the Safina/Barrois match done, I shuttled back to Armstrong to watch a bit of Sam Querry and Kevin Kim. Querry, 21, stands 6-6 and weighs 200. He was ranked (and seeded) #22, a meteoric rise over the past two years. I saw his first Open debut two years ago when he played Gaston Gaudio, now nearly 32, who won the French Open in '04 when Guillermo Coria suffered a meltdown. Querry took the first set rather easily, but lost in four. He holds the ATP record for most consecutive aces (10). Kim, now 31, played collegiate tennis for two years at UCLA; he has never gone beyond the second round of any Slam during the past decade, but the compact (5-11) Korean-American plays imaginatively and artfully uses a combination of drop shots and volleys to break the baseline monotony. Unfortunately for him, Querry can do this too, and better; plus the tall guy has a monster serve, as we all know. He would dispatch Kim in four and make it successfully to the third round before losing to Robin Soderling, a semi-finalist against Federer, also in four.

A brief word about pre-serve routines. Every player has a different technique to get ready to serve. Djokovic bounces the ball a dozen times or more. Ivan Lendl used to keep sawdust in his left pocket and dust his grip with it before each serve. (On changeovers, the baseline would have to be swept.) McEnroe had a see-saw motion. Among the women, Shriekapova has arguably the most irritating routine: check the strings, put the hair behind the ears, dance a little jig. If her serve was memorable, I could see it. But why go through all these monotonous motions for a crap serve? Before he retired, Arnaud Clement was the worst offender among the men: take off the shades, towel the face, wipe the hands, adjust the headband, replace the shades, look up at the sun, ask the ball kid for balls, bounce. They all want three or four balls now, though they can use only two. Some say it's the fuzz – they want the least-used balls for more pop – but I think it's superstition: even numbers vs. odd.

After Querry and Kim split two rather undramatic tiebreak sets, I wandered out to court 11 to watch another unheralded American, Jesse Witten, play Maximo (great name) Gonzalez of Argentina. Witten, 27, at 5-10 and 180, was both unranked and unseeded, having made it through the Qualies into the main draw. He looks more like a boxer than a tennis player, with tree-trunk legs and a barrel chest, but he can hit the ball a ton. I was impressed by how quickly and effortlessly he moved along the baseline, and his forehand reminded me of Jim Courier's – a carpet-beater if there ever was one. Gonzalez (5-9, 155) was unseeded but ranked 74th; he's from the same home town (Tandil) as del Potro. But he's 26 now and (as we can appreciate) not getting any younger.

Witten was up two sets to one – 6-7(3), 6-4, 7-5 – and about to start the fourth set as I settled into a baseline seat. The stands were packed: American fans dominated the sideline seats, chanting Jesse's name, Argentines surrounding me on the baseline, waving blue-and-white flags and shouting in Spanish to counter the sideline and encourage their guy. Gonzalez had a strange service motion too: he would start by holding his racquet up over his shoulder (à la Justin Gimelstob), pointing to the sky. How he generates racquet-head speed, I'll never know. The two engaged in long baseline rallies until at some point Witten would see an opening, run around his backhand, and smack a forehand winner down the line, accompanied by lots of fist pumps and ever-louder chants from his fans. He seemed to get steadily stronger as the fourth set progressed, Gonzalez seemingly frustrated more by questionable line calls than by the quality of Witten's play. Witten dispatched the Argentine 6-2 in the fourth and would go on to meet Novak Djokovic at Armstrong in the third round, where he would take the opening set from the #4 seed in a dramatic tiebreak, but then inexplicably wilted, losing the next three. His serve was what done him in: it completely deserted him.

The Argentines with their little flags brought to mind other popular fan groups I have seen over the years, two of them highly colorful and unforgettable. One was Gustavo Kuerten's supporters from Brazil, who would hold an enormous Brazilian flag up on changeovers and chant his nickname ever-louder: "Gu-ga, Gu-gal!" Kuerten, now 33 and retired, holds three French Open singles titles and was the #1 player in the world in 2000. Always fun to watch, he had a style not unlike Federer's in some ways: he could float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, too. A pity he suffered from hip injuries in his later years. The other was a core group of New Yorkers who came every year to cheer Paradorn Srichaphan, now 31 and Thailand's most successful tennis player. He never made it past the fourth round in any Slam, but rose as high as #9 in the world in '03. Flags and banners may be restricted by the Open now – noisemakers, too, for that matter – but Srichaphan's fans would come bearing Thai flags and hand-held drums (called *damroo*) with beads on a string that made a huge racket on changeovers (and whenever Srichaphan won a key point). This often prompted a warning from the chair umpire.

Even though tennis is regarded as an "elite sport," American fans at the Open come in all shapes and sizes, not surprising given our diverse society. Many of them probably don't play; they come because it's an "event" and it's noisy and there are big crowds and they can shout and clap and stomp their feet and do the Wave on demand, especially in Armstrong, whose intimate size invites it. But because they're not so familiar with tennis protocol, they're slow to take their seats, often delaying a match interminably; they talk non-stop while a point is being played; and they seem more interested in their iPhones and BlackBerries than in the match underway. On Tuesday, when Melanie Oudin was playing in the Grandstand, there was a big crowd, of course, and limited seating. One young New Yorker took the seat next to me while her mother had to sit across the aisle, two rows up. All too often, even during points, she would turn and shout, "Hey, Ma! When're we gonna go to *Ashe*?"

The increasing use of hand-held digital devices may be driven, in part, by the fact that the Open does a lousy job of updating scores for other matches in progress on changeovers or at the end of a set, whether you're at one of the show courts or on the outer courts. With the LCD screens now in use, this should be a simple process, it seems. (Even when updates do appear, there's no symbol by a player's name to indicate who's serving.) But our culture has not only become digital, it's increasingly commercial, so the time is filled more with ads than with scores: Open sponsors, after all, have to remind us who they are, despite the fact that their names (and logos) are plastered a few feet apart on the baseline screens and sideline walls of virtually every court, not to mention the two logo plates fastened in place by the net posts (Chase when the women play, Lexus for the men). On a couple of my outings, I had my Kindle with me so I could use its Whispernet feature to access usopen.org and catch up on scores. Quietly. Without chirps or beeps or other irritating ringtones.

I walked over to court 10 (one of three outer courts with baseline seating) to watch a bit of Tommy Robredo's second-round match. Robredo, 27, the #14 seed, has made it as far as the quarters in three of the Slams, but still has no major title. He split the first two sets with fellow Spaniard Guillermo Garcia-Lopez, 26, unseeded but ranked 50th in the world, though he has never made it past the second round of a Slam. (Garcia-Lopez needed five sets to dispatch my new best friend, Peter Polansky, in the first round.) Robredo has a slight build – he's 5-11, 170 – and an impressive on-court demeanor: never loses his temper, never smashes a racquet, rarely questions a call. Mentally he is very tough and his style is well worth emulating. Unfortunately, the stands at court 10 were packed to the gills and I had to stand along a sideline for the third set, risking cervical spondylosis for a half-hour. Robredo won the third 6-2 and would prevail in the fourth 6-4; he went on to beat James Blake in the third round before meeting Federer in the fourth.

There were two more matches I wanted to see but I had been in the hot sun for eight hours (it was nearly 7pm), which tends to be my limit. Over on Ashe, Drama Queen Jelena Jankovich had her

hands full with Yaroslava Shvedova of Kazakhstan. She was struggling mightily in the third. I watched a few minutes on the Big Screen as I strolled toward court 7. Jankovich was making a ton of unforced errors off both wings and would soon say sayonara, too, as Shvedova dramatically closed out the match 6-4 in the third. The other match had Nikolai Davydenko, the #8 seed, playing Jan Hernych of the Czech Republic (unseeded), over on court 7, which had sideline viewing only. I stood and watched a few games, figuring Davydenko would easily prevail; he was already up a set and eventually closed out the match in straights, 6-1, 6-2. I knew I'd likely see him the following Monday, my fourth and final day out, if he got through his third-round match as expected; his potential opponent in the fourth round would be Robin Soderling, the tall Swede, seeded 12th here, who knocked Nadal out of the French this year only to lose in straights to Federer in the final. If the draw held true to form, Soderling and Federer would meet again in the quarters.

Maybe we need a new statistical category: "forced" errors. Errors are all recorded as "unforced," but this is inaccurate. When a player hits a serve that his opponent can barely reach and you see it glance off his racquet, it's not charted as an unforced error but as a "service winner." Likewise, during a baseline rally, when a player makes a sharply-angled shot, crosscourt or down-the-line, that lands nearly out of reach of his opponent and glances off his racquet too, it's charted as an unforced error. But it's not. Shots like that cause "forced errors," and while there may not be many of them in a match, it would be interesting to see what the stats looked like if they were so recorded.

Friday, September 4th

President Obama is struggling to resuscitate his healthcare reform initiative in Congress. Japan has a new government that kicked the Liberal Democratic Party out for only the second time in more than 50 years. And Afghanistan's recent elections have been marred by extensive claims of fraud and corruption. Will the Administration send more troops to fight the Dark Side there? Stay tuned.

Politics is by and large well outside the frame of reference of the 128 men and 128 women who compete in the main draw of the Open. Their skills are physical, not political. Their contribution to the world, which is not trifling, comes from bashing a yellow felt-covered pellet measuring not less than 2-1/2 nor more than 2-5/8 inches in diameter, weighing more than 2 but less than 2-1/16 ounces, and that when dropped onto a concrete base from 100 inches will bounce more than 53 but less than 58 inches high. So read the specs enforced by the International Tennis Federation. These athletes do this on a surface 27 feet wide and 78 feet long inside the lines using a net 36" high in the center and 42" on the sidelines, all of which is contained within a running area that measures 60' x 120' outside the lines. And very well they do it, supplying inspiration by the bucketful to professional wannabes all over the world as well as to ordinary mortals like us, ceaselessly and unconsciously encouraging us to hit more consistently, with more pace and sharper angles, to see our NTRP ratings rise and to fortify our mental toughness. We are blessed to have this event in our backyard.

One of my good friends and hitting partners, Cengiz Hatiboglu, joined me on Friday, having found a grounds pass ticket on e-Bay. (If you want to see action on both sides of the draw, you have to go two days in succession at some point. Otherwise, you see only the same players each time.) I first met Cengiz during a Turkish Businessmen's Association meeting in New York shortly after 9/11, when I began background research for my next nonfiction book *Endangered Species: Why Muslim Economies Fail*. He was unstintingly helpful, arranging introductions to many high-level Turks in both Istanbul and Ankara when I traveled to Turkey for interviews in the spring of '02. Cengiz was a track star at Robert College (now the south campus for Bogazici University, on the Bosphorus); twenty years my junior, he effortlessly runs down every shot.

We squeezed into some baseline seats on court 11 for a second-round match between Jesse Levine of the US (unseeded) and Marin Cilic of Croatia, ranked 17 and the #16 seed. Levine is another young

American grouped with Sam Querry and John Isner as the next best hope for US men. At 5-9 150, Levine, just 21, is a prodigy; he won the US Clay Court singles championship at 13, played singles for the University of Florida, where he compiled a 24-1 record his freshman year, and beat Marat Safin in the first round at Wimbledon this year. Cilic is the big-serving Eastern European in the mold of Goran Ivanesevich, arguably Croatia's most famous athlete, who won his first and only Slam at Wimbledon as a Wild Card in '01 at age 30 when he beat Patrick Rafter. Goran's first trip to the Wimbledon finals came a decade earlier when he played Agassi and lost in five sets, despite having 39 aces in that one match and more than 200 for the entire tournament – a Wimbledon record that still stands today. (Andre had only 37 aces total for the fortnight).

Levine started strong against Cilic. A lefty, he's been invited to Dubai by Federer to be the Fed's hitting partner, all the better to help him prep for Nadal. Levine was flawlessly consistent from the baseline the first two sets, mixing in surprise drops and volleys to take Cilic by surprise. Cilic was off to a slow start, misfiring badly on serves, volleys and ground strokes alike. In less than an hour, Levine was up 6-4, 6-2.

Seeing him comfortably ahead, we went next door to court 10, which was packed to capacity, to watch Juan-Carlos Ferrero of Spain, seeded 24th, take on Philipp Petzschner of Germany, another journeyman. Ferrero, the '03 French Open champion and former world #1, was down two sets to none. We watched him fight back in the third, 6-4, on his way to winning in five. Nearly 30 but still superbly fit at 6-0 160, Ferrero, whose justly-deserved nickname is the Mosquito, is the ATP's stealth player. He quietly goes about his business until, before you know it, you die of a thousand cuts (or mosquito bites, as the case may be). He would make it through to the fourth round before losing to Juan Martín Del Potro in straights, 3, 3, and 3.

We trekked back to Armstrong to watch Del Potro, the #6 seed, play Juergen Melzer, the Austrian journeyman, unseeded but ranked 38th in the world. Melzer, who won the junior title at Wimbledon in '99 at 18, is widely recognized to be the best player on tour who has never made it past the fourth round of a Slam. Delpo handled him rather easily, I thought, 7-6, 6-3, 6-3. It was far from the scintillating match I saw last year, when the young Japanese pro Kei Nishikori, then only 18, dumped David Ferrer, seeded 12th, in five sets in the third round (also at Armstrong) before running out of steam against Delpo in the fourth. The Argentine, still only 20, took Federer to five sets in the semis at the French in May and would eliminate Cilic in the quarters here in four sets. He moves well for a big guy (6-3, 200). They've started calling him The Cat because of his resemblance to the Czech Miloslav Mecir (same height and weight) who acquired the nickname first, when he was an active player in the 1980s. Who could have guessed that Delpo would eliminate Rafa in the semis in straights? Not I.

We were stunned when we looked up to see the final results for Levine, who lost the last three sets against Cilic at love, three, and love. Something must have happened to cause an air leak in his tires, I thought, but no: he said that Cilic simply started hitting more winners with more heat and serving aces (he finished with 40). I felt bad for Jesse; great potential, of which we will clearly see more.

We went back to court 11 to watch Gilles Simon of France, the #9 seed, take on Thomaz Bellucci of Brazil, the #1 seed in the Qualies, in their second-round match. I thought this match between two power hitters might be tight, given Bellucci's impressive performance in the Qualies and in the first round, but no. Simon was too tough, winning -3, -2, and -4. I *liked* Simon's style; only 5-11, 150, he is very easy for small players like me to visualize as a model. Especially his early racquet preparation. Time and again, he would scamper along the baseline to hit a ground stroke – *holding his racquet back as he ran* – and smack a crosscourt or down-the-line winner that left Bellucci shaking his head. Easy, you say? Try it some time. Coaches stress early racquet preparation all the time, but we ordinary mortals typically start getting the racquet back as we approach the ball. I tried doing it Simon-style

the following weekend and was amazed at the difference. Go, Gilles! (Sadly he retired from his third-round match with Ferrero with a knee injury, down just two close sets to one.)

A brief comment about injuries. Three top competitors retired from their third- or fourth-round matches this year, citing leg injuries: Simon (knee), Acasuso (knee), and Nikolai Davydenko (groin). All of which makes me wonder if many of the top guys – Nadal included – wear custom-made orthotic arches to keep their knees properly aligned. When Rafa started having knee problems last summer, I thought about posting a comment about orthotics to Uncle Toni on Rafa's Website; on second thought, I figured it might give Nadal another edge so I demurred. I wanted Roger to keep winning Slams. McEnroe and Connors both started wearing custom orthotics late in their careers to prolong their court lives, and I have to believe that many of the current pros do too.

When I first experienced discomfort in my knees in '91 at age 50, I researched the problem in the medical reference section of the Princeton Library – this was well before the advent of the Internet, mind you. It didn't take long to discover the fact, confirmed by several respected sources, that if you have pain in the knees, look first to the feet. (Arches tend to flatten over time, throwing the joints out of alignment.) This little minor-league detective work led to my first pair of orthotics, which solved the problem and kept me on the court pain-free. I have them reset every five years. Other than a hiccup in '05 when I suffered a partial tear of the right medial meniscus in a local tournament, requiring arthroscopic surgery, the knees have held up well, thanks for the most part to well-crafted arches. And stretching, to be sure, every morning 24/7 and before and after play. Since the incident in '05, I put tournaments off-limits, but I'm fine with that. It's all just for fun now.

The most famous case of a dramatic comeback from a knee injury has to be the Austrian Thomas Muster. In 1989 he had won his semifinal match in the Sony Ericsson Open, in Miami, and left the grounds to prepare for the final against Ivan Lendl, the world's top player. In the parking lot, he was struck by a drunk driver; the accident severed ligaments in his left knee. He flew back to Vienna to undergo surgery, and had a special chair constructed that enabled him to sit on the court a month later to resume hitting ground strokes (he was a clay court specialist). There was a video of this remarkable feat at one time, but I'm unable to find it now. Extraordinarily inspirational. Six months later Muster was back on the court, recommitted to becoming #1. He reached the quarters of the US Open in '93, '94, and '96 (when I saw him) but his principal objective was the French: he won the singles title at Roland Garros in '95 and finished the year as the world's top player. Unforgettable.

Back in Armstrong, we watched Nicolas Almagro, the #32 seed from Spain, play an uninspired match against Robby Ginepri, now 27, once an up-and-coming American hopeful. His breakout year was in '05 when he reached the Open semifinals, losing to Agassi in five. He's the only pro in the Open era to play four consecutive five-set matches, in fact, which he also did in '05. But this may reflect part of his problem (not counting the retro sleeveless shirts he still wears): Ginepri has trouble closing out matches. During his play against Almagro, we nicknamed him "Whatever." He would simply shrug his shoulders when he missed, often after going for too much down the line against a fast-paced crosscourt shot from the Spaniard, giving the impression that deep-down he didn't really care whether he won or not. Not caring, he wound up losing in five; I was surprised that Almagro couldn't close out the match, either. (He would lose to Nadal in straights in the next round.)

Over to court 13 for a set with Fernando Gonzales of Chile, the #11 seed, and Josselin Ouanna of France, up a set over Gonzo and into a tiebreak in the second. When we got there – standing room only on the east sideline – who should be standing next to us watching a match on the neighboring court but Nick Bollettieri, architect of Agassi and Sharapova among other notables, surrounded by a coterie of royal attendants. I edged in, tapped him on the shoulder and asked how he thought his Maria would fare against the rising Melanie Oudin in their third round match the next day. "Should be interesting," was all he would say. (Bye-bye, Maria.) I thanked him for what his academy, now

part of the IMG group, had done for tennis and asked if he had any programs for seniors. "Sure, come on down," he said, handing me one of his cards. "Our adult drill-and-play sessions are pretty awesome." Of that, I have no doubt. On the court next door, his girl Vera Zvonareva of Russia was on the cusp of beating Anna Chakvatadze 3-6, 6-1, 6-1.

Gonzo had his hands full with the 23-year-old Frenchman, who made it through the Qualies into the main draw and was now into his second-round match, tied at one set all with the 11th-seeded Chilean. Ouanna clearly had a height advantage at 6-4, but the more experienced Gonzalez kept cranking up the spin he put on the ball – how he does this so consistently without throwing a piston (or two) in his shoulder, I'll never know – and would prevail in four. Gonzalez penetrates the Slams deeply, forever reaching the quarters in every one of them. But he made the finals of the Australian in '07 and the semis of the French this year and would play Nadal here in a quarterfinal match spread over three days, interrupted by rain. Rafa was up a set and leading in the second-set tiebreaker, 3-2, when play was interrupted by rain on Thursday night. When it resumed Saturday afternoon, Rafa won four straight points to close out the second set and took the third (and the match) 6-0. *What the hell happened to Gonzo?* Forty-four points were played in the third set, twenty-four of them unforced errors by the Chilean. Memo to management: a whiff of a tanked match here?

Finally we headed over to court 4 for the start of the match between David Ferrer of Spain, the #18 seed, and the tall, 6-3 Argentine José Acasuso, unseeded but ranked 47th. He has struggled the past couple of years (his ranking got as high as #20 in 2006), but he often comes up with wins over several top-ten players. Their match got underway after a long 5-set match between Nicolas Lapentti of Ecuador and Denis Istomin of (are you ready?) Uzbekistan. Lapentti received a Wild Card to the main draw; Istomin squeaked in by virtue of his ranking (89). When we got to the court, the sideline stands crammed to capacity, Istomin and Lapentti were in a fifth-set tiebreak as the sun sank noisily in the west. The Uzbekistani won the set and the match, 7-6(4) to make his first-ever third round in a Slam. (He would lose in straights to Cilic in the next round.)

I *like* David Ferrer. At 27, he's almost ancient as touring pros go, but at 5-9 160 he's got a frame we ordinary mortals can easily identify with. It's not that his strokes are so impressive; he does hit the ball a ton, it's true, but then so does everybody else. It's his footwork. Ferrer just *never stands still*: whether he's banging groundies from the baseline or receiving serve or about to hit a volley, it doesn't matter. His feet are always moving, moving, *moving*, in quick little steps, side-to-side, up-and-down, forward-and-back. He's another Energizer Bunny. When he returns serve, he is positively dancing; his jiggling reminds me most of Stefan Edberg, of whom it was said that he would wear out a pair of sneakers just jumping rope to hone his footwork before every tournament. Ferrer has the same DNA.

It was Darren Kindred, my long-time hitting coach and head pro now at Bucks County Indoor, who years ago taught me how to watch footwork in these Open matches. You need a good vantage point, of course, and you have to cup your hands around your eyes and focus on a player's *feet* – not the ball – to get the full sense of his (or her) on-court movement. (It really works; try it sometime.) It was a hoot doing this with Ferrer; his footwork was awesome. After a while, it can make you dizzy.

It was getting late, after 7pm by the time Ferrer and Acasuso walked onto the court, so we decided to stay just for the first set, which was characterized by long baseline rallies (what else to expect from two clay-court specialists?). Acasuso won, 6-3. It was nearly 8pm by the time we left, and the long line for the night session seemed to stretch back to the boardwalk. Their match finished around 11pm, as it turned out, with Acasuso prevailing 6-2 in the fifth. (His reward was to meet Gael Monfils of France, the #13 seed, in the third round; he was forced to retire with a knee injury early in the third, trailing two sets to none.) I was sorry to learn that Ferrer lost the match; not that I don't like the Argentine, but I do think it's good for us small fry to stick up for each other.

Monday, September 7th – Labor Day

The last day of the *haji* this year. Our daughter Claire accompanied me; we had planned to see the finals of the Qualies together that last Friday in August, but rain intervened. We started the day at Armstrong, where the Swede and #12 seed Robin Soderling would play Nikolay Davydenko, seeded 8th. As most everybody knows, Soderling knocked Nadal out of the French this year and made the finals, where Federer beat him in straights to acquire his record-tying 14th Grand Slam title, bringing him even with Sampras. (He would break the record at Wimbledon in an epic five-set final with Roddick. Were it not for Roddick's errant volley near the end of the second set, Roger might still be stuck at fourteen.) Davydenko is a perennial top-ten player, now 8th-ranked, and is another small player who's an effective role model for ordinary mortals. He generally gets through to the quarters in the Slams, but has made the semis twice both here and at Roland Garros. He's great fun to watch.

So the Swede and the Russian traded groundies for an hour, Soderling winning the first set 7-5 and Davydenko the second 6-3. Just before Soderling was about to win the third set, Davydenko asked for the trainer and took a medical timeout. A game later, he retired after Soderling won the third set 6-2. The apparent cause was a groin injury, although neither the Swede nor any of us in the stands had noticed anything strange about Davydenko's movements on the court. This had a somewhat Polish aroma: in the summer of '07, Davydenko retired from an ATP match in Sopot, Poland, with the 74th-ranked Argentine Vassallo Arguello leading 2-6, 6-3, 2-1. Just before the Russian retired, around \$7 million in bets on Arguello poured into the London bucket shop Betfair, which it quickly voided after Davydenko withdrew. That time, it was a foot problem. There were accusations of match-fixing, which Davydenko denied. The ATP initiated an inquiry; the Russian's phone records were subpoenaed; involvement of the Russian mafia was suspected. Months later, Davydenko was exonerated, but when he pulls out of big tournaments like this the buzz starts all over again.

Speaking of buzz, we hustled over to Ashe to watch 17-year-old Melanie Oudin start her third set against the #9 seed, Nadia Petrova, after winning a nail-biting second-set tiebreak. The stadium was rocking. Oudin was feeding off the electricity and getting stronger, stroke by stroke. By now her apparent "tactic" of losing the first set while going on to win the match had created a kind of mystical aura – she was 17-4 in three-set matches this year – and her confidence seemed to grow as the noise got louder. Her snappy cross-court forehand got sharper and sharper, and she threw in a couple of well-timed drop shots that caught Petrova completely off guard. Still, it was tense until she went up a break and managed to close out the third set, and the match, 6-3. The place exploded. How long could she keep this up? At some point, it seemed, either nerves or the atmosphere or the shock of realization – or a night match – would catch up with her. But you had to admire her grit; she was a scrapper, no doubt about it. The Open's "Cinderella Story," they were saying. It was feel-good all the way, for sure, but would the glass slipper fit before the clock struck midnight? Alas, no: she would bow out to Wozniacki, a finalist, in the quarters, -2 and -2.

About word about "bubbles." When Melanie Oudin played her quarterfinal match against Caroline Wozniacki, she clearly looked out of sorts. She started feebly and never recovered, and wound up losing 6-2, 6-2. When Pam Shriver interviewed her coach, Brian de Villiers, during the match, he said she didn't seem to have the right mindset that night. What he didn't say was that he had her practice extra long for the QF match – four hours during the day, I heard. What's more, this was her first night match of the Open. They should have done some hitting the night before, on one of the lighted outer courts. As much as I admire de Villiers for what he has done with this remarkable tennis talent, he could have done more to keep her "in the bubble." After her fourth-round match, having beaten four Russians in a row, she was deluged by media requests. De Villiers should have turned them all down, kept focusing and preparing for the next match, have them line up for interviews after she'd gone as far as she could. Big mistake, in retrospect. Her experience brought to

mind another newcomer, Gilles Müller of Luxembourg, at the '05 Open, when beat Andy Roddick *in the first round*, at night, in three straight tiebreak sets. He succumbed to the media avalanche too, and as a result he had zip in the tank when he played his second-round match 36 hours later against Robby Ginepri. I watched that match, which was in Armstrong, eager to see the '01 Open junior champion (and the world's #1 junior that year) who had just beaten the '03 Open men's champion so soundly. He went out like a lamb in straights. Too bad. Hasn't been heard from much since, though he did reach the Open quarters last year, his first Slam QF match. Got to protect the bubble.

Claire and I came back to Armstrong to watch the final set between the unseeded Czech Petra Kvitova, who had ousted the #1 seed Dinara Safina in the previous round, play Yanina Wickmayer, a relatively unknown but 50th-ranked 19-year-old from Belgium. Kvitova had won the first set 6-4, Wickmayer the second by the same score. Both sets combined took barely an hour. The third set went nearly as long, the pair trading unforced errors by the kilogram until Wickmayer closed it out at 7-5. Nobody wanted to win, it seems. There are matches like this even on backyard courts. But Wickmayer made half as many unforced errors (24) as the Czech (51), despite having lost her serve seven times. (There were fifteen breaks in all, indicative of a lack of skill if not passion or courage.) As we exited Armstrong for the second time, I thought no way will the Belgian win her quarterfinal match against the more experienced (though also unseeded) Kateryna Bondarenko of Ukraine. But she did, and in straights. I watched that match on ESPN2 and couldn't believe my eyes. Will the real Yanina Wickmayer please stand up? Alas, no: she went out like a lamb, too, in her semifinal match against the #9 seed and eventual finalist, Caroline Wozniacki.

Back to Ashe to watch Federer play the last set and a half of his match with Tommy Robredo. Claire chose to stay on the plaza and people-watch; by the time I rode the long escalator to the *boi polloi* sections the place had started to empty out, fans anticipating a closer match in Armstrong perhaps. I didn't even bother to climb the stairs to the 300 level but snuck down instead to an empty baseline seat in the 200 level, right behind the railing, with a clear view of the court. The outcome of the match was never in doubt; those who stayed until the end were there for the artistry, the poetry, the magic.

Federer doesn't so much run as glide, or float, on the court. He's what I have called the Fred Astaire of tennis. Skeptical? Go back and watch a couple of Astaire's classic films, like *The Gay Divorcée* or *Flying Down to Rio*, with his favorite dance partner, Ginger Rogers. The plotlines in his movies may have been a bit one-dimensional, but the dancing was incomparable, tap and ballroom both. Astaire *owned* dancing back then, just as Federer owns men's tennis today.

Roger is an all-court player; he can volley with the best, as he showed in '03 and '04 when he won his first two Wimbledon titles. But he's also content to lull opponents to distraction from the baseline, crafting his points tactically, stroke by stroke, until all of a sudden, *wham*: a backhand explodes down the line from an impossible spot or he whips a sharply-angled crosscourt forehand winner when his opponent is either out of position or dares to approach the net. Federer attributes his superior conditioning (he just turned 28 in August) to his long-time fitness trainer, Pierre Paganini, who has worked with him since he was about 15 and competing for junior titles. Federer works on conditioning two hours a day, five days a week, when he's not playing tournaments. Which is why, when you watch him after a long rally, you rarely see him breathing heavily. How long he can keep this up is a good question, but his fitness has kept him injury-free and his competitive drive suggests that, deep-down, he's still motivated to acquire more major titles, thus raising the bar even further.

If you don't like the Fred Astaire analogy, how about Mikhail Baryshnikov? This is no ordinary tennis player we're watching here; he's a genuine work of art. At this point, midway through the second set, Federer was toying with Robredo, gliding along the baseline, somehow *knowing* where Tommy was going to hit the ball next, somehow *being* there to hit an otherwise out-of-reach forehand

that curled around the net post for a winner. The Fed was even anticipating Robredo's serves to his backhand in the ad court, which he took so early he was able to hit crosscourt returns at such sharp angles that Robredo couldn't run them down. On the rare occasions that he could, and followed them to net as a result, Federer would craft a topspin lob over his head for a winner in the back court. In the blink of an eye, Federer was through the fourth round in straights, 7-5, 6-2, 6-2.

I hooked up with Claire again outside and we went back to Armstrong to watch Fernando Verdasco, the #10 seed, take on John Isner in their fourth-round match. Isner, the 6-9 giant from Georgia, had booted Roddick out of the tournament in a long five-set match in the third round, winning both the first and last sets in tiebreaks. I was curious to see if his mojo was still working, unable (as a short person) to understand how tall guys can actually play this game. Isner runs less like a giraffe, which is Cilic, than like a scarecrow (if scarecrows can run). Isner lumbers, but he's not slow. At 6-2 180, Verdasco, now 25, is a half-foot shorter than Isner but has a much deeper resume. He always gets to the fourth round of the Slams and made the semis of the Australian this year. What's more, he successfully persuaded Gil Reyes to take him on as a fitness coach; Reyes got Agassi back into the top ten after Andre had slipped into the 100s and was playing Challenger tournaments for a while.

Isner started off strong; he broke Verdasco early with his big serve and held to take the first set 6-4. But then he steadily lost steam. During the second set, he started missing volleys and slapping the net cord with his racquet in frustration when he did. When Verdasco broke him, his shoulders sagged and his head dropped. What is this virus that infects Americans like Roddick and Isner and Querry and Ginepri and even James Blake with such negative body language? Must be the water. In any case, Verdasco held to take the second set 6-4 and though they were tied at a set all, the outcome seemed a foregone conclusion. On changeovers, Verdasco was full of energy, dancing like a boxer and eager to come back out, while Isner shuffled on and off the court like a sleep-deprived paramedic. He would lose the next two sets 6-4, 6-4, and let Verdasco into the quarters against Djokovic.

On our way out, we stopped by one of the outer courts to watch the diminutive Shuichi Sekiguchi of Japan, seeded #9 in the juniors, play a few games in his first-round match against the unseeded Pierre Herbert of France. Sekiguchi is 18 but looks 15 and appears even shorter than that. Sadly, he was down a break in the third set and never recovered. It took the much taller Herbert a long time to close out the match; strangely, he started coming to net on his serve. Maybe he's too young to have read Tilden, or maybe the French edition of Tilden's book *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball* is out of print. But why, if you're winning, would you ever change tactics in the final game? *Hello?* [Well, after all, he's French, right?] The ultimate game went to deuce several times but Herbert eventually succeeded on – you guessed it – one last unforced error by Sekiguchi.

As we exited the East Gate, I turned for a final look at the tennis complex. In the fading light of day, the red-tiled stadiums glowed a soft shade of amaranth. A perfect hue for the mecca of tennis. It's always sad to leave the Open for the last time, especially with the onset of darkness coming earlier and earlier each day, signaling the end of summer. On the other hand, it's only eleven months now until the Qualies kick off the 2010 Open next year, and I can't wait. In the meantime, we've got the Australian in late January, Roland Garros in May, Wimbledon again in late June, and the US Open again in late summer, the biggest and best of them all. Right here in our own backyard.

Some Random Thoughts from this year's *haji*

Some of the most compelling drama at this year's Open occurred in the semifinals and finals for both the women and the men. Unforgettable was Serena's emotional meltdown in her semifinal match with the Belgian Comeback Kid, Kim Clijsters: Serena serving at 5-6 and down a set, a foot fault on her second serve made it match point at 15-40. But then she went berserk, blew up at the line judge

and uttered a stream of invective that has made every highlight reel from here to the moon. Point penalty, match over. Took her two days to apologize, and she's not out of harm's way yet: fined \$10,500.- by the USTA, she may still be subject to further penalties. But Clijsters deserved the win. Playing only her fourteenth match since coming back to the women's tour this summer after giving birth last year, she provided as much inspiration as Melanie Oudin, though more quietly.

Also memorable in a positive sense was Federer's 'tweener during his semifinal match with Djokovic, when he was up two sets to none with the Serb serving at 5-6 love-30. Djokovic tried a drop shot, which the Fed retrieved; Djokovic next hit a deep lob, which Federer also retrieved and then hit between his legs past Djokovic for a crosscourt winner. Djokovic could only stand at the net and gawk. It was absurd, a shot of mythic proportions, absolutely incredible. Federer's reaction made you think it was match point, but the next point was, and the Fed slammed a forehand return for another winner and the match.

Inexplicable was Rafa's lame semifinal match with Del Potro, which the Argentine won in straights. Delpo was the fresher during the final with Federer on Monday, having played the first semifinal match on Sunday. Winning -2, -2, and -2, he had played only 24 games in about two hours. Federer needed 37 games and about three hours to get past Djokovic 7-6, 7-5, 7-5 in the second (and later) match, so he had less time to recover. Though the Fed started strong in the final against Delpo – his sixth different opponent in six finals – his serve was misfiring and he was broken twice in the fifth and final set. Delpo won in five, the first Open final to go five sets in more than a decade.

I've been a stout fan of Federer's since the beginning of his long run six years ago. It's always sad to see him lose a Slam final; only two players have ever beaten him and both speak Spanish. He should hope that his next opponent in a final will speak anything but. I can only imagine how he himself must feel when he loses a major. Interestingly, this year's Australian and US Open finals could have been cloned from the same DNA. Federer smoked Roddick in straight sets in the semifinals at Melbourne and played brilliantly, but then lost in five long sets to Nadal in the final. At this Open, Federer beat Djokovic in straights in the semis and played brilliantly, but then lost in five long sets to another "Spaniard," this time from Argentina.

Thought by some to be the personification of British imperialism, Rudyard Kipling won the Nobel prize for literature in 1907. One of his poems, titled "If...", contains the famous couplet inscribed above the clubhouse entrance to center court at Wimbledon: *If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same...* Sounds uplifting, doesn't it? But in a highly competitive, mano-a-mano sport like singles, it's obvious Kipling never played the game. Try quoting that to Federer after he loses to Nadal – or Delpo now – or quote it to anybody else for that matter after their losses to Federer. Losing is no damn fun.

Still, this rain-delayed men's final should give a much-needed impetus to rescheduling the men's semifinal and final matches, which the Open traditionally holds on consecutive days (assuming good weather): the semis on Saturday afternoon and the final the next day. Every other Slam gives its finalists a day of rest in between, and perhaps now the Open will be persuaded to do that. The most challenging (for fans, the most entertaining) back-to-back days at the Open were in 1980; I had just returned from a decade working non-stop in Asia and Europe in time to watch that year's Open on the tube. Back then, on the last Saturday, the women's final was sandwiched between the men's semifinal matches. Starting time was 11am, as usual. In the first semi, McEnroe defeated Connors in a four-hour, five-set match. Chris Evert then beat the Czech Hana Mandlikova in a long three-set women's final. And Bjorn Borg defeated Johan Kriek in another four-hour, five-set semifinal match. The "day session" wasn't over until midnight; McEnroe and Borg had to play their final the next afternoon, which McEnroe won in *another* long five-setter. It was a veritable weekend orgy. Such is the gladiatorial nature of competitive singles, but scheduling at the Slams should be consistent.

Still, at the relatively “old” age of 28, Federer has had a stellar year: he made the finals of all four Slams, won two of them (the French for the first time), tied and then broke Pete Sampras’s record for Slam titles, has made 22 *consecutive* Grand Slam semifinals (the next closest is Ivan Lendl, with 10); and his wife Myrka gave birth to twin girls, Myra and Charlene, in August (Roger’s own birth month). What’s not to like about this incredibly gifted athlete? If Bill Tilden was arguably the greatest player of the last century, Roger Federer may well be remembered as the greatest player of this one. But the youngsters are chasing him fast: Delpo is barely 20, Djokovic 21, Rafa 22, Gulbis 19, Querry 20, and on and on. I still believe the Fed at least three more major titles in him: 18 is a nice round number.

A brief word or two about the effects of age. Two things it seems to me, maybe more, come with age, like uninvited guests who stay the weekend. One is the loss of foot speed; I first noticed it by chance when I turned 53, and it seems to take another small slip every five years or so. You can increase the fitness training component, to be sure, and the aerobics part too, but there is no denying the effect: a septuagenarian can never run stride for stride with someone half his or her age. The late comic writer, Larry Gelbart, creator of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Tootsie* among other classics, put it all in perspective when he turned 81 last year: “Contrary to popular belief, it’s not the feet that go first,” he said, “it’s remembering the word for feet.”

The other effect has to do with the optic nerve, which seems to pick up the pace and direction of the ball more slowly too. The optic nerve stimulates neurons in the brain that send an immediate signal to the appropriate muscles to move. When that signal starts taking more than a nanosecond, lateness results – in preparation, in shot selection, or in execution, maybe in all three. By the time Ivan Lendl was in his early thirties, he had already become notorious for the rigorous preparation he put in before each Open, even going so far as to resurface the court in his backyard every year with the same DecoTurf-II surface as the Open and *at the same time* the Open courts were being prepped. He also famously acquired a piece of fitness equipment – I forget the name – that was designed not for bulking up but for improving hand-eye coordination. Similar to the concept of computer games like Space Invaders, it used special software to emulate moving objects and required the user to grip a trigger mechanism to eliminate them. Lendl talked about this wonderful machine a lot, saying how much it helped him strengthen his optical nerve. When I located the manufacturer and learned that the purchase price – at that time – was more than \$15,000, I went back to Space Invaders. <Sigh.>

On the subject of broadcast coverage, ESPN2 is new at the Open this year, having replaced USA, and the Tennis Channel is new too. ESPN2 (and its sibling network ESPN) do a terrific job of covering all four Slams with essentially the same broadcast team: the McEnroe brothers, Darren Cahill, Mary Jo Fernandez, Pam Shiver, Brad Gilbert, and Cliff Drysdale. “Killer” Cahill is far and away the best analyst, as you might expect of a former top-ten player. His best result as a pro was to knock Boris Becker out in the second round of the ‘88 Open and make the semis, where he lost to eventual champion Mats Wilander. But Cahill was Andre Agassi’s coach for a long while and Lleyton Hewitt his most recent acolyte. Still, I miss Tracy Austin: superb broadcast voice but better yet, an incomparable analyst on the women’s side, far better than the ever-gushing, quotidian Mary Carillo, who’s never had an original thought in her life.

I miss Tony Trabert too, the American champion who used to share the broadcast booth with Pat Summerall (former placekicker for the Cleveland Browns and longtime NFL commentator, blessed with a Golden Voice). Trabert, who won the French, Wimbledon and US championships in 1955, consistently provided the kind of analytical insight that John McEnroe seems incapable of articulating. I mean, bless Johnny Mac for his conversion to civilized behavior – he was an extended toddler for all too long on court, when he behaved like an maniacal inmate in need of anger management. He would never have been able to get away with a temper like that under today’s rules; they’d bounce him out right of the draw. But his on-screen comments seem limited to continuous loops of obvious remarks like, “This guy’s gonna have to dig down deep if he wants to stay in the

match.” (Duh.) Okay, dig down deep we get. But *how*? What does he have to do differently, what tactical changes does he have to make, what part of his opponent’s game does he have to attack that he hasn’t yet, and so on. Quote Tilden, at least: never change a winning game, always change a losing game. *How*? Younger brother Patrick seems to offer more perceptive and penetrating commentary than 7-time Slam winner John.

The most confusing aspect of the Open’s broadcast coverage came during the intermediate weekend, when ESPN2 had prior commitments to cover college football on Saturday and Sunday nights and handed the cameras for the evening matches over to the Tennis Channel (available on cable systems at an extra charge). Since the Tennis Channel has its nose under the tent now, I guess the Open folks are thinking, better to have them inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in. One tweak they could make: keep the analysts away from the spectators in the stands. Shriver often roves with camera and mike to catch VIPs in captivity. Her interview with the actor Alex Baldwin, for example, consisted of these inanities. Shriver: “The last time I saw you, you were driving a hybrid.” Baldwin: “And the last time I saw you, you were driving a school bus.” (Laughter.) He was referring to her minivan full of young kids. How does *any* of this trivia illuminate the tennis we’re watching in high resolution? Gilbert’s not bad – he tends to make too many predictions that fall flat – but he has some good insights now and again and a mellifluous voice. Still, as the author of *Winning Ugly*, his tactical advice is often borderline unethical. One example from his book: if you’re a club player about to start an important match, Gilbert recommends practicing for an hour beforehand, then arrive at the court ten minutes late and say to your opponent, “Sorry I’m late. Why don’t we just skip the warmup and get right into the match?” His book is appropriately titled.

Allen Fox is another little-recognized past master. He played for UCLA, winning the NCAA singles title in 1961. He was the 4th-ranked singles player in the country in 1962, beat John Newcombe and Jimmy Connors when he became a pro, coached Brad Gilbert in his early career, and was the tennis coach at Pepperdine University for 17 years. He is the author of three books: *Think to Win: The Strategic Dimension of Tennis*; *If I’m The Better Player, Why Can’t I Win?* and most recently *The Winner’s Mind: A Competitor’s Guide to Sports and Business Success*. His second book has been on my shelf for more than three decades. He and Bill Tilden have written two of the best books on tennis I have read – Tilden’s *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball*, also on my shelf, is a classic. Both authors treat strategy and tactics in considerable detail, avoiding the gossip and anecdotes from their personal lives that tend to characterize popular tennis books today (McEnroe, Gilbert, Serena Williams and on and on).

A ton of ink has been spilled trying to solve the quandary of American tennis today. For the first time in Open history, no American men reached the quarterfinals. This statement is typically uttered in the breathless style news commentators use when reporting on breached flood levees in New Orleans. As if to say, this shouldn’t *be*. The Russians and Eastern Europeans have their tennis factories, churning out budding tennis players by the container load. “Why don’t we do this here?” people ask. Well, don’t look now but we’ve started. The USTA recently began creating a number of USTA-certified Regional Training Centers around the country (there are now three) to focus more intently on player development. While this is encouraging, and we should salute the USTA for doing it, we shouldn’t necessarily expect prodigies to emerge. When you think about the great American players of the last 25 years – Chris Evert, Tracy Austin, Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, Michael Chang, Todd Martin, the Williams sisters, and (more recently) Melanie Oudin and Roddick and Isner and Querrey and Blake and on and on – none of these players was factory-made. They had talent in their own DNA and came with their own backgrounds, their own distinct personalities, their own unique approach to development (especially Venus and Serena). If the USTA is serious about finding more talent in distressed urban areas, they could do a lot worse than retain the services of Oracene Price and Richard Williams as consultants to find better ways of doing so. Factories alone won’t work. We’re Americans. America is the land of the Lone Ranger. Individualism reigns here, and always

will. A kid with tennis talent has to have *passion*. “If it doesn’t come from within,” wrote the late great Buddhist philosopher Suzuki Daisetz, “where is it going to come from?”

A brief word about tickets. The Open’s corporate sponsors – Lexus, Chase, Continental Airlines, AmEx, et.al. – get blocks of prime seats, which they pass along to valued clients, execs, and suppliers. Other important USTA supporters – like the travel consolidators who buy up blocks of seats and offer them at a premium in combination with airfare and hotel packages, get good seats, too (the 200-level seating in Ashe, for example). The USTA itself offers a number of “ticket plans,” which typically combine less-interesting night session seats with the more sought-after day sessions. (Not that the night tennis is not exciting; it’s that with two matches there’s not enough of it.) I used to subscribe to a ticket plan – three consecutive days combined with two nights – but stopped because the day sessions were usually bunched together (first-round matches, for example). USTA lifetime members, which I became in 1981, get first pick when tickets first go on sale every April, but the only outlet is TicketMaster, which often pushes these tickets over to its wholly-owned partner, TicketsNow, at ludicrously inflated prices. (TM does this so often that they’ve become the target of an ongoing Congressional investigation into fraud. Two years ago, when I ordered three tickets from TicketMaster, I received only two.) So if you call TM on the first day tickets are available, or visit their Website, you may learn to your surprise that tickets for many day sessions in the first week are simply unavailable. This is patently absurd. And fraudulent. It stinks.

The optimal solution is to take the express E train from Manhattan to Roosevelt Avenue/Jackson Heights, transfer to the #7 local to Mets/Willets Point, and buy tickets at the Open box office when they go on sale to the public the first Monday in June. Scalping is now prohibited within 1,000 feet of the Open grounds, and is strictly enforced by the cops. But twenty years ago, you didn’t have to worry about TicketMaster or the box office; you could just stroll down the boardwalk between the train station and the East Gate and say three words – buying or selling? – to the scruffy, shady-looking characters who ambled around holding up a finger or two indicating the number of tickets they were buying (or selling). You could get tickets for the early rounds this way without paying a premium (there were no grounds passes then). But those were the days when the Open facility was still pretty crummy, before the eye-popping facelift it underwent when it built Ashe stadium and renovated the entire grounds. The restrooms back then were nothing more than trailer-park-type port-a-potties with clogged urinals made of PVC that constantly reeked of stale urine.

When the 22,500-seat Ashe stadium was completed in 1997 at a cost of \$250 million, they renamed the old (main) stadium for Louis Armstrong and tore down the upper deck to give it the ambience it has today. (Armstrong now seats ~10,000 and the neighboring Grandstand ~6,000.) Ashe and Armstrong honor a tradition, and tradition is nothing if not sacred in tennis, unlike professional football and baseball. They sell “naming rights” to their stadiums for a large chunk of cash. Still, if naming rights come to the Open the Grandstand may be the first to go, probably to be renamed Court Nike. And then a few of the bigger outer courts, like 7 and 11, may be next. <Sigh.> Everything seems to be for sale in this country. We may see the day in the not-distant future when the Open assesses extra charges for the main (show) courts, over and above the ticket price – an access fee, for example, or a Privileged Viewing Fee for baseline seating. They’ve already begun, in fact; about three years ago, seats in sections 108 and 109 on the north end of Armstrong and sections 127-130 on the south were converted to Reserved Seats that cost about twice the price of general admission. But they do have a purpose: without them, re-entry into Armstrong is not guaranteed. During a dramatic, five-set men’s match, like the third-round encounter between Djokovic and Stepanek in ’07 that went all the way to a tiebreaker in the fifth, Armstrong is packed to the gills, and the drama is palpable. Without a reserved seat, I’d never have gotten back in to watch that final set.

Being at the Open every year and watching lots of compelling tennis is, in a word, inspiring. It can inspire both to higher levels of fitness training and to better on-court tactics as well; watching these

pros is a constant reminder of how critical footwork really is, even at our level. At *every* level. When I started going in the early 1980s, I'd come back from a day there eager to hit the courts with renewed vigor. I still feel that way now, though I wish my knees were 25 years younger. Back then, I'd go to the Open once, maybe twice, but it was never enough. Four or five days now is routine. But the "Open effects" can last for several months and as they start to fade, lo and behold, another Open is on the horizon. Long may it reign.

The Open was tinged with a pall of sadness this year: when 16-year-old Sloane Stephens was preparing for her first-round match in the juniors, she received word from home in Louisiana that her father had just died. John Stephens was a former NFL running back (and rookie MVP); he apparently lost control of his truck and ran off the road. Sloane won her first- and second-round matches, preferring to stay on the court to avoid distractions, but after returning from her father's funeral she lost in the third round. If she takes something from this tragic experience, she could be a formidable competitor later on. She reached the junior semis at the French this year and the quarters at Wimbledon.

Then during the final weekend, it was announced that Jack Kramer had passed away at the age of 88. The same Kramer of the laminated Wilson racquet, Kramer the organizer of the first pro tour in the 1950s, Kramer who was a founder of the Association of Tennis Professionals and its first executive director. I still remember his towering height when he brought his guys to Dallas in my formative years; he would often hit serves before an exhibition match, and to us teenagers his power was awesome. Without doubt, he was the godfather of the Open era. He will be missed.

In the distant future, when I no longer inhabit this planet and finally move to paradise, I firmly believe three things will be waiting for me there: great weather, great friends, and great tennis.

Just like the Qualies and the US Open. Who knows? Maybe Bruce Barnes will be there too, and I'll finally have a chance to hit with him.

A few sources

For data and background on the men, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) Website at www.atpworldtour.com/.

For data and background on the women, the Sony Ericsson Women's Tennis Association (WTA) Website at www.sonyericssonwtatour.com/

For additional technical information on the game and sanctioned tournaments (such as Futures events and the Challenger series), the official governing body of tennis is the International Tennis Federation (ITF). Its Website is www.itftennis.com/

Additional personal background on the players occasionally available at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

For specific results in prior Grand Slams and year-by-year summaries of major tournaments and players up to 2002, see *Total Tennis: the Ultimate Tennis Encyclopedia*, edited by Sport Media Publishing, Inc., with the Boston clown, Bud Collins. Toronto: Sport Classic Books, 2003. Curiously, this massive reference book of nearly a thousand pages has no index. Truth in advertising: 1) searching for data can be a challenge, and 2) it reads as if edited by *People Magazine*. *Caveat emptor*.