

US OPEN REPORT
August 31, 2006
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My first visit to the 2006 US Open turned into a 12-hour day, and that was with a late start. As has become an annual tradition occasionally described in these pages (tennisontheline.com/us040901.htm), I was accompanied by my young friend Gabriel. We waited nearly half an hour for a 7 train when we switched from the E at 74th Street, and then we stood in the security line for over half an hour at the South Gate of the National Tennis Center. (The line was even longer at the main entrance.) I'm not sure why it takes so much longer to examine the bags of US Open ticket-holders it does down the block at Shea Stadium, but the sight of people standing in an endless, barely moving line is evidence that, at least in some ways, terror has won. The moral of the story for spectators: If you can get in without carrying a bag, by all means do so (usopen.blogs.nytimes.com/?p=32).

COURT 10

Shahar Peer (Israel) v. Martina Muller (Germany)

When we finally got onto the grounds at about 12:30 p.m., I went to Court 10, one of the two immediately next to the South Gate, while Gabriel went roaming to watch our old pal Davide Sanguinetti play doubles. I arrived just in time to see Shahar Peer of Israel (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtaq954.html) drop the second set of her second-round match to Martina Muller of Germany (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtam631.html). There are many breaks of serve in Peer's match, and in the second set Muller won 50% of Peer's service points, breaking three times, while Peer won 46% of Muller's, breaking twice.

Both players are devotees of what David Foster Wallace calls the power-baseline game (www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/sports/playmagazine/20federer.html?ex=1156651200&en=5fc4ca8264a47fa7&ei=



Peer meditates.

[5070&emc=etal](#)). You don't see them slicing backhands, except for desperate gets. They are not frequent visitors to the net, either, but they can whack topspin groundstrokes all day.

By the time the third set was underway, the court was packed, both along the sides and in the section behind the court. We saw Peer's interesting habit, which must have been ingrained by a sports psychologist if not by her coach, Jose Higuera: between points, she turns her back to the court and closes her eyes for several seconds. The guess here is that she is visualizing the next point. In the third set, visualization worked. Peer broke at 30 in the 1-1 game and recovered from four break points to hold serve for 3-1. She consolidated her lead with a second break, abetted by two big backhands, for 4-1. Thereafter, the players held serve, and Peer closed out a 6-1 5-7 6-2 win. Things would get more interesting for Peer on Friday, when she came back from 1-5 in the third set and fought off five match points to upset Francesca Schiavone. Whether she'll have similar success against Justine Henin-Hardenne in the

Round of 16 is questionable.

COURT 10

Richard Gasquet (France) v. Gilles Simon (France)

I stayed on Court 10 for the match between countrymen Richard Gasquet (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpg628.html) and Gilles Simon (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpsd32.html). In the warm-up, one immediately noticed that Simon has a hitch on his volleys, taking too big a backswing, but a bigger serve than Gasquet. These observations remained accurate till midway in the first set, when Gasquet started cranking up his serve to 130 mph. That's not quite fair, is it? Gasquet moves effortlessly, has the best-looking backhand on the men's tour, and is also serving bombs?

Simon seemed impressed with Gasquet's game, too, and dropped the first two sets with alacrity. I moved on before Gasquet completed his 6-0 6-2 6-3 victory. The futility of Simon's efforts was underscored just after he'd won his first game, breaking Gasquet's serve in the third game of the second set. With Simon serving at 0-15, Gasquet popped a string. He immediately started slicing all his groundstrokes just to keep the ball on the court. Eventually, Simon hit wide.



Gasquet backhand.



Simon serve.

Gasquet's tactics might not have caught up with the maturation of his strokes. He tried several ill-advised drop shots. More significant, perhaps, he camps out way behind the baseline, which blunts the effectiveness of his shots and gives his opponents more time to recover. His game is beautiful to watch, and his serve much stronger than when I'd seen him in the juniors a few years ago, but — even barring injury — he is not at the Federer-Nadal level. Then again, who is?

Arthur Ashe Stadium

Rafael Nadal (Spain) v. Luis Horna (Peru)

In the early rounds of the Open, my next stop, Ashe, is not exactly the place to be. The matches are not terribly competitive, and the seats above the two tiers of luxury boxes are far removed from the action. I paid a courtesy call on Ashe, rejoining Gabriel, to see the conclusion of Rafael Nadal's



Gabriel and Horna.

(www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpn409.html) four-set win over Luis Horna (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atph390.html). Horna was brave and swung away at everything, but Nadal is Nadal. The final score was 6-4 4-6 6-4 6-2.

Grandstand

Novak Djokovic (Serbia) v. Mardy Fish (US)

I was at the Grandstand, one of the best venues at the Open, for the entire match between Novak Djokovic (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpd643.html) and Mardy Fish (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/)

[atpf339.html](#)). Djokovic is a great talent who may rise to the top levels of the game. He and Fish are both good to watch, because they are not anchored to the baseline. Fish in particular was comfortable coming forward, concluding 44 of the match's 292 points at the net. But Djokovic also was unafraid of the net, and their appealing styles gave the match some variety.



Djokovic.

There were no breaks of serve in the first set. The key point came with Fish serving at 4-5 in the tiebreak. His forehand half volley stood up enough for Djokovic to pass with a backhand down the line, and this mini-break cost Fish the set. In the second set, with Fish serving at 2-2, deuce, Djokovic scored with a crosscourt backhand pass and then pocketed the break — the second and last of the match — when Fish netted a backhand. Djokovic saved two break points in the next game for a 4-2 lead. With Djokovic serving at 4-3, Fish reached 30-40, and the fans chanted: “Break, break, break.” Djokovic got back to deuce with an outstanding backhand pass crosscourt and saved another break point when a Fish forehand return of serve sailed long. With Djokovic serving for the set at 5-4 40-30, he hit an unreturnable backhand down the line that was called good. Fish protested vigorously to the chair umpire, shouting and slamming his racquet, but the capacity to challenge calls via replay is available for now only in Ashe and Louis Armstrong Stadiums. Thus, Djokovic was up two sets.

Fish found life in the third set, breaking for a 3-1 lead when Djokovic double faulted. He saved a break point in the seventh game

and closed out the set in the ninth game with an ace. In the fourth set, Djokovic saved a break point at 3-3 and limped briefly after doing the splits in the tenth game. At 6:25, three hours and five minutes into the match and just before the tiebreak, the lights went on. Fish, look-



Fish.

ing for a fifth set, saw his hopes unravel when his forehand went long at 3-3 in the tiebreak. Djokovic followed the mini-break with his third consecutive ace to go to 5-3 and extended to 6-3 when Fish could not return his next serve. The serve returned to Fish, facing three match points. Djokovic needed only one, as Fish's forehand volley caught the net. The final score was 7-6(5) 6-4 3-6 7-6(3). In all, Fish won more points than Djokovic, 148 to 144. In the two tiebreaks, however, Djokovic won 14 points and Fish only 8.

Court 13

Yoni Erlich/Andy Ram (Israel) v. Jesse Levine/Sam Querrey (United States)

Jesse Levine (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpl799.html) is nearly a foot shorter than his partner, Sam Querrey (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpq927.html), and yet the American team featured Levine, who is 30 years to the day my junior (www.juniortennis.com/ajt/playerinfo.php?player_id=49), serving first in each set. Maybe they like having Querrey's wingspan at the net, though I must say that Levine serves fairly hard for a short fellow. When I arrived at Court 13, Levine and Querrey were in the process of closing out the first set against their seventh-seeded adversaries, Yoni Erlich (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpe152.html) and this year's mixed dou-

bles champion at Wimbledon, Andy Ram

(www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpr399.html).



The Israelis squared the match after breaking Levine's serve at 2-3 in the second set.

Levine overhead.

In the third set, Querrey double faulted on break point at 1-1 and was broken again at 2-4 when he stayed back on his second serve and the Israelis found the opening created by the up-and-back formation. Erlich served out the final game at love as we heard repeated public address announcements — with every potential for Guantanamo-style torture — that the Virginie Razzano-Martina Hingis night match was beginning on Ashe. The final score was 4-6 6-3 6-2.

Court 7

Jonas Bjorkman (Sweden)/Max Mirnyi (Belarus) v. Stephen Huss (Australia)/Wesley Moodie (South Africa)

With rain forcing the organizers to cram in as many matches as possible, this doubles match was moved from Court 11, where it was supposed to be the fifth match, to Court 7, where it was the *seventh*. (This was possible because an earlier women's doubles match on 7 had ended with a retirement at 2-1 in the first set.)

The draw was not kind to the second-seeded Jonas Bjorkman (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpb446.html) and Max ("The Beast") Mirnyi (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpm595.html), as they had landed the 2005 Wimbledon champions in Stephen Huss (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atph523.html) and Wesley Moodie (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpm759.html). My uncle, whom I had seen

earlier in the day at the Peer-Muller match, was unbeknownst to me at this match, too. He later told me that he had seen Moodie defeat Gael Monfils in singles earlier that day, and Moodie is that rarest of creatures on the tour, an inveterate serve-and-volleyer.

There has been much talk about the decline of the doubles game, some of which is probably inevitable now that so much is at stake in singles that the best players are loath to take on the obligation of doubles. This match gave rise to another thought about saving doubles. In my youth, players did not take much time between points, with the exception



Bjorkman in the I formation.

of Nastase, Connors, and McEnroe when they were berating officials. Today, the time between points has become extended, as typified by Peer's meditation sessions. This is less noticeable in singles, because the points are long, especially in the power-baseline era. In doubles, however, the lengthy delays for pow-wows between staccato points are quite noticeable. What's more, when the players in this match conferred, as they did before almost every point, the partner of the server would still flash a signal behind his back, which the server would acknowledge with a "Yeah" (or, on occasion, a "No"). My modest proposal: find a way to eliminate inter-point conferences. It's not as simple to do as to pro-



The Beast.

pose, because teammates will frequently conclude a point standing right next to each other. If a way can be found to eliminate the conferences, no one will be worse off, because everyone will do without the confabs, and the matches will speed along.



Moodie.

In the first set, Bjorkman and Mirnyi got to set point when Huss was serving at 5-6, but a backhand lob from Bjorkman went just long. Bjorkman set up a second set point with a nifty backhand volley, but Moodie put away a Bjorkman return with a crosscourt forehand



Huss.

volley. Huss got to game point with an inside-out backhand volley after his second serve and then hit an outstanding backhand volley on the sideline to get to the tiebreak. The crucial point came with Mirnyi serving at 3-4. Bjorkman poached, and Huss's backhand return down the line found daylight. Huss pushed the lead to 6-3 with another mini-break after a winning forehand volley. With Moodie's big serve prepared to close out the set, Bjorkman staved off one set point with a backhand return down the line, but a Mirnyi backhand return went long and the set belonged to the unseeded pair.

Moodie evaded two break points in the 2-2 game in the second set, one of which he saved with a miraculous forehand half volley cross-court. At 3-3, Huss fell behind 0-40. He got to 15-40, but Moodie planted a sitter of a backhand volley into the net, and the first break of the match was in the books. Bjorkman and Mirnyi nearly took the set going away, as they had two set points on Moodie's serve in the ninth game. Moodie escaped, but Mirnyi served out the set at love.

In the third set, both teams changed the order of serving to assure that the taller players, Moodie and Mirnyi, would go first. In the second game, I saw an uncommon point. Bjorkman overhit a sitter, which sailed beyond the baseline, where it hit Moodie on the fly: point to Bjorkman and Mirnyi. Bjorkman, one of the more popular players on the tour, apologized to Moodie and asked: "You okay?" Moodie took a medical timeout, with the trainer rubbing his legs, after the 2-1 game, but he did not seem any worse for the wear afterwards. (Cramps were to be a feature of this evening.) The decisive break of serve came in the seventh game, with Huss serving. At 15-15, he missed a backhand volley wide. Bjorkman nailed a forehand return of a second serve down the line for 15-40. Huss then found the net with his backhand volley off a Mirnyi forehand pass. At 5-4, 40-15 Mirnyi needed only one of two match points, closing out the match 6-7(4) 6-4 6-4 with an ace up the middle.

Arthur Ashe Stadium

Andre Agassi (US) v. Marcos Baghdatis (Cyprus)

After his breakthroughs in Melbourne and at Wimbledon, Marcos Baghdatis (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpb837.html) was expected to send Andre Agassi (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpa092.html) into retirement. Although my ticket was for the day session, I thought it was worth a try to see whether I could get into Ashe for the conclusion of this match. It was quite easy to do. When I entered, Baghdatis was about to win the third set after dropping the first two. I don't feel I have much to say about this match, considering how much coverage it received, but suffice it to say that (i) there was a real Christians v. lions dynamic in the crowd, particularly in the fifth set; (ii) the pro-Agassi feeling was so strong that the fans booed Baghdatis when he limped around or sought to take a break after his

cramp attack in the ninth game; (iii) Baghdatis somehow held serve at 4-5 and seemed to be moving better; but (iv) he had nothing left in the tank and Agassi closed out the match with a break in the twelfth game, 6-4 6-4 3-6 5-7 7-5. Toward the end, it was not great tennis, with Baghdatis unable to move and Agassi starting to miss, but it was compelling theatre.

The final ball was struck at 12:38 a.m. and I did not get home till after 2:00. It was a very long day and night at the US Open, starting in August and concluding in September, and one I will long remember.



Baghdatis cramping (above),
Agassi backhand (below).

