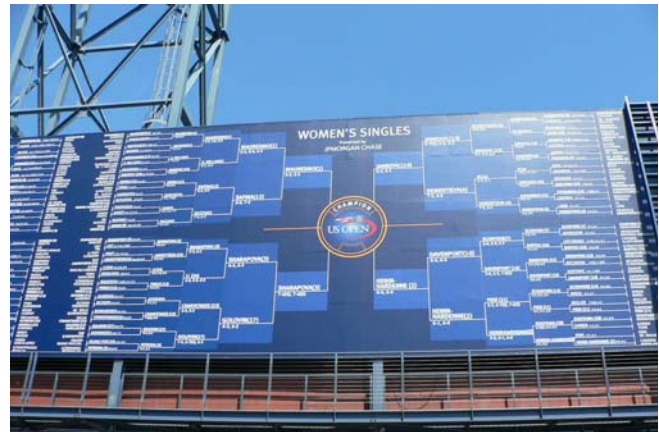
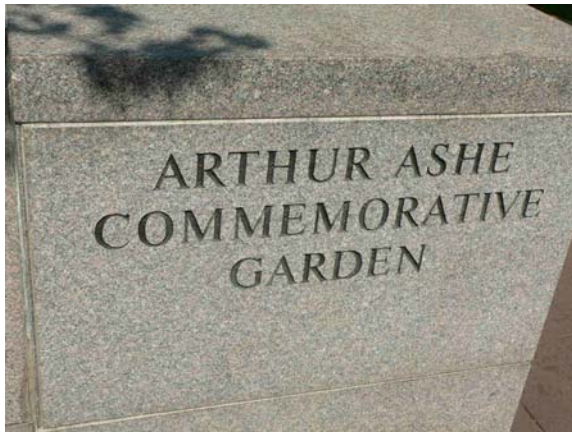


US OPEN REPORT
September 7, 2006
Jerry Balsam



On my third and last visit to the 2006 US Open, on Thursday, September 7, I breezed through security with my bag in under three minutes. Perhaps the line was so short because this time I had arrived at 10:30 a.m. rather than just after noon, or maybe it's that no one goes to the Open on the second Thursday. In either case, for a moment, I felt like the terrorists had *not* won.

Milling around the grounds before play began at 11:00, I saw Court 5 being covered with carpeting. I can understand why some of the outside courts are taken out of commission as the tournament goes on, but why does that happen to the Grandstand or —most of time but not in this rain-soaked year — Louis Armstrong Stadium? I should think it would be a good experience for some of the juniors to play on a show court. It also would be good for the spectators, because the show courts, unlike the field courts, all offer places to sit in the shade. This is not a small matter, as evidenced by a video story on the Web site of the *New York Times* featuring interviews with fans who decamped to the food court and elsewhere to get out of the second Thursday's bright sun (usopen.blogs.nytimes.com/?p=133). Or maybe that's the idea after all: in the absence of a comfortable place to sit, spectators will head for the cash registers.

**Louis Armstrong Stadium
Virginia Ruano-Pascual (Spain)/Paola Suarez (Argentina) v. Nathalie Dechy (France)/Vera Zvonareva (Russia)**

My first match on Thursday was a women's doubles quarterfinal between the seventh-seeded team of Ruano-Pascual (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtar160.html) and Suarez (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtas360.html), who were once the top team in the world, and Dechy (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtad254.html) and Zvonareva (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/



Suarez and Ruano-Pascual.

wtaz142.html). I camped behind the court in Armstrong, in the shady portion of the stands, with my father and uncle. They had come to the Open on Tuesday, a session that was



Zvonareva and Dechy.

nearly rained out but not quite. The USTA magnanimously offered an opportunity for Tuesday ticket holders to return on Wednesday or Thursday, and my father and uncle took them up on it. My friend Gabriel, who had been planning to attend the Open on Tuesday night, only to be rained out, bought a special \$20 grounds pass on Wednesday and saw a whole lot of tennis. With all the rain, the USTA must have taken a bath, no pun intended, at this year's tournament. I think the organization did well to try to accommodate

disappointed fans.

Remarkably, all four players in this match stayed back on their serves. What is more, when serving, the seventh seeds had their net player stand no more than two or three feet from the net, so the server was almost guaranteed to have to play the entire point, as all lobs became her responsibility. There were moments in the match when all four players were on the baseline. I stayed for the first six games, which featured three breaks of serve. After I left, Dechy and Zvonareva (presumably without any of Zvonareva's famous tears) completed the upset, 7-5 6-3. In fact, they went on to win the event.

Court 7
Donald Young (United States) v. Greg Jones (Australia)

My next stop was a boy's singles third-round match featuring fourth-seeded and much-ballyhooed Donald Young (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpy124.html) against Australia's Greg Jones (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/add8078.html).



Young.



Jones.

I caught only a few games, because Young was leading 6-3 4-3 with a break of serve in the second set when I arrived. It's fascinating and difficult to try to figure out which juniors will become outstanding pros. In a way, it is analogous to venture capital investing: you have to be ready to pick a lot of losers along with the few winners you find.

Young has been the object of a great deal of publicity and a generous supply of wild cards into professional events, none of which resulted in his taking so much as a set before he got off to a fast start against Novak Djokovic in round 1 of the men's singles at this year's Open. He doesn't seem to be growing terribly tall and it remains to be seen whether he'll develop the power he needs to succeed on the tour. I do not hold myself out as a mas-

ter predictor in this regard: I had seen Gael Monfils play unimpressively after winning the first three junior Grand Slam events of the year and wondered whether he'd be a good pro; and I also had seen Stephane Bohli (now No. 246 in the world) make a fool of Robin Soderling (now No. 34).

Jones has a big serve and hits hard off the ground, but he was trying some foolish shots by the time I arrived. He saved a match point in the course of holding serve at 3-5, and now it was Young's job to finish the match. At 30-15, the lefthander netted a sitter and yelled at himself. On the next point, he sprayed a forehand wide and motioned as though to throw his racquet. But Young handled the break point well, taking a Jones moonball in the air and concluding the point with an overhead. Jones then missed a service return and was long with a lob, giving Young the win, 6-3 6-4. Young had one more win in him before falling in the semifinals, leaving his future as mysterious as ever. As a two-time winner of the junior event at Kalamazoo, he has shown he can play well against his peers. Whether he can make the step to the top rung of competitive tennis we will see in the next two or three years.

Arthur Ashe Stadium

Ashley Fisher (Australia)/Tripp Phillips (US) v. Paul Goldstein/Jim Thomas (US)

I saw the very end of this match, with Goldstein (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpg333.html) and Thomas (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpt213.html) staving off match point by successfully challenging a first serve that had been called good. Fisher (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpf304.html) and Phillips (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpp452.html) won the point on second serve, closing out the match 7-5 6-4. My only observation: Goldstein was brave to play in the sun without a cap.



I formation in doubles.

Arthur Ashe Stadium

Lisa Raymond (US)/Samantha Stosur (Australia) v. Martina Navratilova (US)/Nadia Petrova (Russia)

The No. 1 seeds, Raymond (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtar144.html) and Stosur (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtas787.html), faced off against the 10th-seeded team and sentimental favorites, Navratilova (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtan007.html) and Petrova (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtap379.html). One expects tennis expatriates to land in Monte Carlo or, in a pinch, Florida, but Petrova is introduced as living in Cracow. That struck me as an interesting choice.

As opposed to the women's doubles match I had seen on Armstrong, this one featured four net rushers. Martina was the hippest kid in the room, wearing her baseball cap backwards — but only when she served. Stosur regularly served in the range of 109-113 mph, but Petrova, an outstanding singles player before she was slowed by injuries, came near 120 mph on the radar gun when she got going. Still, it was Petrova and then Stosur who were the only players to drop



Raymond and Stosur (near court), Navratilova and Petrova (far court).

serve in the opening set. The latter break came when Stosur was serving for the set at 5-3. Petrova got to break point by driving a forehand up the middle, and then Martina sealed the deal with a lob over Stosur's head. The ensuing tiebreak was a rout, with Navratilova double faulting at 1-5 on the way to a 7-1 win for the top seeds.

In the second set, Navratilova and Petrova changed the order of service, with Martina stepping to the line first. Presumably, they did this so that Martina, the only lefthander on the court, would not have the sun in her eyes on her toss. Thus, the team never had the sun in their eyes when serving, as opposed to always facing the sun had they not made the switch. Serving at 1-1, Petrova climbed out of a 0-40 deficit with some big serving. Petrova faced a fifth break point after a strong forehand return from Raymond elicited a forehand half volley into the net. On the following point, Stosur whipped a backhand return of Petrova's second serve up the middle for

the break. Raymond and Stosur kept on trucking, with their service games threatened only once, when Stosur served at 2-1. Martina was broken at 3-5, and thus ended her career in women's doubles . . . perhaps. A couple of nights later, she was to go out a champion in the mixed doubles final.

**Arthur Ashe Stadium
Nikolay Davydenko (Russia) v. Tommy Haas (Germany)**

It was a no-brainer for the USTA to schedule this quarterfinal, between the 7th and 14th seeds, during the day, because the other men's match of the day featured Roger Federer and James Blake. But Haas (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atph355.html) has been ranked as high as No. 2 in the world, and Davydenko (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpd402.html), though slight and prematurely balding, is a relentless tennis machine who has earned his residence in the top ten these past couple of years. The players offered contrasting styles: Haas, with a beautiful one-handed backhand, tended to play further back



Davydenko.



Haas.

in the court, while Davydenko, with his two-hander, stayed closer to the baseline. Both players ventured to net on occasion, but Haas — perhaps because he was coming off consecutive fifth-set tiebreaks — tried many more drop shots, while Davydenko seemed reckless with his swinging volleys. After five or six of them went in, I decided this was not recklessness but technique.

Davydenko drew first blood with a break at 1-1, but Haas got even at 4-4. When Davydenko next served, at 4-5, Haas punched a forehand volley cross-court to get to set point and captured the set when Davydenko missed a forehand long. The second set proceeded without incident to a tiebreak, which Haas won going away, capturing four consecutive points from 3-3.

In the changeover following the fifth

game of the third set, the sound system at Ashe played The Ramones' *Blitzkrieg Bop* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blitzkrieg_Bop), an interesting choice for a match featuring a German — who was playing against a Russian, no less. I felt old when I contemplated that the song was released well before either player had been born. The song got my cousin Ira, who had joined the family group at the Open by this time, to reminisce about the Seinfeld episode in which Jerry says, “But George, she’s a Nazi,” and George responds, “But she’s a cute Nazi.”

Before long, Haas fell out of blitzkrieg mode. Davydenko, with a break point in Haas's 3-4 game, hit one of his many inside-out forehands for a winner and then served out the third set at love. In the fourth set, Davydenko — “Kolya,” to the cognoscenti — struggled to hold serve at 2-3 and then went up 5-4 when Haas double faulted on break point. Again, Davydenko finished off the set easily, holding at 15.

By the fifth set, Haas was wearing down. Serving at 15-30 in the first game, he double faulted and hit a ball into the stands in anger, drawing a code violation warning. A Davydenko backhand pass secured the break. Haas broke back for 1-1, as he stood in the backhand corner on break point and pulled a big forehand down the line for the pass. Haas was broken again at 2-2, falling into a hole with a drop shot that didn't work and losing the game when Davydenko whipped a crosscourt backhand pass. With Davydenko serving at 2-3, Haas was just long with a backhand pass down the line, and the Russian eventually held serve. Haas was running out of gas, not moving well, and dropped his serve again at 2-4, this time at love.

Not so fast, Davydenko! As Kolya tried to serve out the match at 5-2, he got to match point, but then missed forehands on three consecutive points for the break. Haas sum-

moned the trainer, who massaged his thighs. In the 3-5 game, Haas held with some difficulty, but he managed to return the onus to Davydenko, who struggled. The Russian fell behind 15-40, but recovered to deuce with a cross-court forehand and an uncharacteristically stiff 131 mph serve. Haas then dropped a backhand into the net, giving Davydenko a second match point. This time, Kolya banged a serve at 128 mph and put away Haas's short return with a forehand into the open court. The final score: 4-6 6-7(3) 6-3 6-4 6-4, with the victor earning the dubious pleasure of playing Federer in the semis.

Louis Armstrong Stadium
Meghann Shaughnessy/Justin Gimelstob
(US) v. Vania King/Vince Spadea (US)

Cousin Ira and I relished this match, because we had spent a number of hours at prior Opens watching both Gimelstob (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpg354.html) and Spadea (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atps544.html) play an unlikely favorite of ours, the dour Czech Daniel Vacek. In 1996, Spadea bested Vacek in four sets in the first round; in 1999, Gimelstob came back from a 2-1 deficit in sets to defeat Vacek in the second round. Vacek (<http://www.atptennis.com/3/en/players/playerprofiles/?playersearch=Vacek,+Daniel>), who had a sub-.500 record in singles, won 25 doubles titles and finished his career with nearly \$5 million in prize money.

Having seen Gimelstob a number of times, I'd nicknamed him the Blubbery Klutz, although, to be fair, he really isn't blubbery: his upper body may be soft, and his serve surprisingly mild for a man of 6'5", but his legs are like pipe cleaners. Now closing in on his thirtieth birthday, Gimelstob is also suffering from a bad back, wearing an imposing-looking girdle to try to keep things together. Spadea, for his part, has had a longer career



Gimelstob adjusts girdle.

than one might expect, and a sideline in hip-hop. (Don't quit your day job, Vince.) Shaughnessy (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtas565.html) had been as high as No. 11 in the world, but those days appear gone for her. King (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ws/wtaqd34.html) is 17 and has reached No. 70 in the world, so she must have all kinds of hopes, but I wonder whether she's big enough to play the game at the highest level.

When the family contingent arrived, Gimelstob was serving at 6-4 0-5. He held serve, but then King held to tie the match and force a "match tiebreak" in lieu of a third set, as the US Open does for mixed doubles. Spadea and King went up an early mini-break when Gimelstob missed a volley at 2-2, but Gimelstob got back the mini-break on the following point with an overhead that hit Spadea. The decisive point came when Gimelstob planted a backhand volley at Spadea's feet for an 8-6 edge. With Gimelstob serving at 8-7, Shaughnessy hit a winning overhead for a 9-7 lead, and Gi-



Shaughnessy.

melstob closed out the match with a 113 mph ace wide to King's forehand. That was the last ball Gimelstob struck at this year's Open. After the 6-4 1-6 (10-7) win, his back seized up, and he and Shaughnessy gave a walkover in the semifinals to the eventual winners, Martina Navratilova and Bob Bryan (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atpb588.html).

For those of us who relish the Open, the treat is to see the journeymen up close. If you want to see Federer or Sharapova, you'll get a better view on television. But you can see Gimelstob and Spadea, Daniel Vacek (or Jan Vacek) and another of our favorites, Davide Sanguinetti (www.usopen.org/en_US/bios/ms/atps480.html), in the flesh. The spectacle of Federer bewitching Roddick on the final Sunday has meaning because the two of them fought their way through a draw of 128 players. It doesn't happen often, but the journeymen can beat the greats, as Sanguinetti de-



Spadea.

feated a young Federer in the Milan final in 2002, as Sharapova's hitting partner, Michael Joyce, beat Jim Courier in Los Angeles in 1995. Even seeing the journeymen play each other is a reminder of how good the pros are and how hard it is to reach and maintain their level of play. They earn every penny they make.



King.