



...It's How You Play the Game

Sportsmanship is an integral part of every match, from junior tennis to the pros.

BY KENT OSWALD

It is odd how often tennis sportsmanship surprises us.

In the first-set tie-break of his quarterfinal match this year at Indian Wells, Novak Djokovic feathered a drop shot that Jo-Wilfried Tsonga barely reached before flicking it wide. Walking back to the baseline to prepare to receive serve, Djokovic heard the umpire announce the point in his favor and immediately corrected the chair. Djokovic explained that Tsonga's shot had nicked his racquet. Even on replays, it was practically impossible to see the contact. But Djokovic knew; he conceded the point.

A couple months later, Djokovic found himself on the other side of doing the right thing when Andy Murray protested a time violation warning that had been issued to Djokovic in the final of the Madrid Masters. Djokovic was serving at 30-all, 4-2 in the deciding set when the chair ruled he was taking too long to serve. Murray marched over to the chair. "I'm the one [who] was keeping him waiting," Murray said. "He was at the line about five seconds before me."

In both cases, there was discussion of how unusual it all was. It is as if sportsmanship is a new concept, when, in fact, it has been part of the game almost from the beginning.

In 1881, the United States National Lawn Tennis Association (forerunner of today's USTA) formed tennis's first national governing body. The founders, gathered in the Fifth Avenue Hotel in Manhattan, explained in their constitution a desire "to promote the development of tennis as a means of healthful recreation and physical fitness; to establish and maintain rules of play and high standards of amateurism and sportsmanship...."

Such wording remains in the USTA constitution, and Chairman, CEO and President Katrina Adams is focused on continuing the tradition that treating the person across the net as you want to be treated is as much a part of the game as groundstrokes and serves. She notes that "calling fair-play



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(Clockwise from far left) Whether it's Tim Smyczek and Rafael Nadal at the 2015 Australian Open, Dalma Galfi and Sofia Kenin in last year's US Open girls' final, or Lleyton Hewitt and Jack Sock this season at Hopman Cup, the post-match handshake has been symbolic of tennis's sporting culture for decades. Sportsmanship is reinforced for today's young players through measures such as reciting a Player Pledge, which Jessie Aney led last year at the USTA Girls' 18 and 16 Nationals.



Fred Spilth

in 2016 its Junior Leadership Team, initially featuring 29 boys and girls from various sections who have distinguished themselves through play and character.

Sportsmanship is not defined merely by a point switched from one side to another. Stories abound at all levels of the game, such as the one from Arizona about a high school JV tennis player who took it upon himself to focus on extending rallies with his opponent—who he had been told was on the autism spectrum. Or the tale of how an unranked player in one of the major junior girls' tournaments in California did not default her top-ranked opponent when someone mistakenly walked off with her equipment bag and couldn't return it in time.

Perhaps the quantity of such stories still shocks because images and memories of poor behavior are, well, just so much more memorable. How many people remember Serena Williams's loss of composure in her 2009 US Open semifinal against Kim Clijsters, but have long forgotten her shrugging off four controversial calls in the deciding set of her 2004 US Open quarterfinal loss to Jennifer Capriati? Also, even though it was barely a year ago, few probably recall the grace with which Williams handled her semifinal upset off the racquet of Roberta Vinci, a result that stopped her right at the edge of becoming the first person since Steffi Graf in 1988 to complete a Grand Slam. "She's going for it at a late stage," Williams said after the match. "So that's good for her to keep going for it and playing so well. Actually, I guess it's inspiring."

Lessons and the importance of sportsmanship are usually learned first at home. "My parents didn't tell me what I could or couldn't do, but if [in their opinion] I acted badly, that was the end of my tennis," says Rajeev Ram, who earned sportsmanship awards at the USTA Boys' Nationals in 1999 and 2001, and also in 2001 received the International Tennis Hall of Fame's Bill Talbert Junior Sportsmanship Award.

While Ram doesn't pinpoint where the line is between good and bad sportsmanship, he is clear on its value. "The biggest incentive [for

behaving well] is that the more you deal with negativity in a calm and put-together manner, the better you play." The Denver-born, Indiana-born Ram remembers Pete Sampras always being under control and notes that Andre Agassi's most productive years were when he competed with a "workmanlike" attitude.

Todd Martin was part of that tennis generation. A former world No. 4 and current International Tennis Hall of Fame CEO, Martin is the only American in the last 30 years to win the ATP's sportsmanship award, claiming it in 1993 and 1994. Like Ram, he credits his parents for instilling a sense of appropriate behavior and sees the advantages of sportsmanship as a guide to keeping one's head in the game. He cites two Grand Slam tournament champions to make his point: "Patrick Rafter, was he more successful than Goran Ivanisevic? I would argue yes, and would argue that Goran was immensely more talented than Pat. But Pat had control of his spirit and Goran struggled, which gave Pat a competitive advantage."

Former USTA President Jon Vegosen echoes that message: "How we play and compete are reflections of who we are, our character, our values, and how we hold and treat others." Vegosen, USTA President from 2011 through 2012, created the USTA Sportsmanship Committee, with Martin as honorary chair, "to broadly promote sportsmanship across the tennis playing and viewing landscape." He also initiated the US Open Sportsmanship Award "to recognize the positive influence that elite tennis players could have in promoting sportsmanship." Past winners include Kevin Anderson, Roger Federer, Venus Williams, Caroline Wozniacki, and Bob Bryan and Mike Bryan.

To promote sportsmanship at all levels, the USTA encourages teaching pros and tournament administrators to make it integral to the lessons they share. Lisbeth Blum, co-tournament director of the USTA Girls' 18 and 16 Nationals, is among administrators emphasizing character. Her tournament opens with a player reciting the USTA Player

their best behavior in front of college recruiters.

Timon Corwin, former tournament director of the USTA Boys' 18 and 16 Nationals in Kalamazoo, Mich., now managing director of tennis at the Western Racquet Club in Elm Grove, Wisc., takes issue with those who argue that misbehavior could increase the sport's audience. "I don't think it was John McEnroe's behavior that made him famous. In general, I think fans cringed when he would go off on an umpire, and it took away from his popularity."

By way of contrast, Corwin continues, "This generation we are in right now is incredible in terms of sportsmanship."

Take a couple of incidents involving, separately, Americans Jack Sock and Tim Smyczek. As the 2016 season began, Sock, a former US Open boys' singles and mixed doubles champion, was taking on 2001 US Open men's singles winner and former No. 1 Lleyton Hewitt in Hopman Cup. Serving at 4-5, 30-love in the first set, Hewitt hit a first serve that was called out. Sock encouraged Hewitt to challenge the call. Hewitt heeded the advice and won the challenge.

But that's Hopman Cup, a co-ed team event that, for all intents and purposes, is an exhibition. Smyczek's moment, which happened a year earlier, involved much higher stakes.

Having worked his way through qualifying to the biggest match of his career, Smyczek found himself in a fifth set against Rafael Nadal in the second round of the Australian Open. Nadal stood two points from the match and had just missed a first serve. Smyczek signaled the umpire that Nadal deserved another first serve because a spectator shouted while he was in the middle of his service motion.

Nadal was full of praise after the match. "I want to congratulate Tim," he said. "He's a real gentleman for what he did in that last game... Not a lot of people will do this at 6-5 in the fifth."

Not to be contradictory, but maybe it's more people than he (or we) think. It's good sportsmanship. ●