

SIGHT LINES

A SLAMMIN' GOOD TIME

by Andrew Chmura

I am not one of those people who can remember my first grade teacher's name or where I picked up the milk from the lunch lady. However, I do remember the evening of my fourth birthday when my sister, Connie, re-gifted her wooden Chrissie Evert tennis racquet to me. After the cake and ice cream, she took me out to the driveway and peppered me with at least 20 balls until I finally made contact. I will never forget that feeling, the euphoria of making contact with the ball and watching it sail into the wind. The whole family came out to cheer on my success and we stayed out there until it was too dark for me to see the ball. I was in love with tennis.

Since then, most of my life has revolved around tennis and, therefore, I have many wonderful memories. I always say that the most interesting people I have met in my life, I have met through tennis. Perhaps it's something about the accountability that tennis players need to have that makes them attractive, being able to accept success and failure on the same level, knowing they will be put on the line to succeed or fail again, and being willing to do so over and over.

I met my beautiful wife in high school on the public tennis courts in Lee, Mass. I was fortunate enough to play good college tennis for Bob Bayliss at Notre Dame. I attempted to play Satellites and Futures events throughout the world. And although my goal throughout was to play in a Grand Slam tournament, I eventually realized that I was not big enough, talented enough, fit enough or smart enough on the court to compete with the best.

Fortunately, I've discovered that Paris, London, New York and Melbourne can still be a reality for me, as they can be for every tennis fan. Size, ability and conditioning certainly don't matter, although, as with on-court play, having a good strategy can be invaluable to successful fan experiences.

First, you'll need to determine which portion of the tournament's two weeks you wish to attend. In the second week, only 16 men and 16 women are left in the singles draws. Because generally the best 16 are left, you usually have very competitive matches to watch. But over the years, I believe I have seen the best matches on the smaller courts in earlier rounds. In fact, I think the end of the first week is the most riveting time of the tournament because of the second- and third-round action.

Once you arrive in the Grand Slam tournament cities, public transportation will very easily put you right in the middle of the action. Roland Garros (metro stop Porte d'Auteuil), Wimbledon (tube stop Southfields) and U.S. Open (subway stop Shea/Flushing) fans can disembark about a mile from the stadium entrances. The walk from the train stops to the tennis is an experience in itself. From Southfields to Wimbledon, there are numerous house-side shops that offer knock-off Wimby gear. You will notice the racquets don't cross, so they don't infringe on any Wimbledon trademarks. It is a great place to get some less expensive gear for

your friends not lucky enough to travel with you.

Melbourne has a fantastic system of trolleys, much like San Francisco, which will drop you off right at the back side of the entrance to Melbourne Park. You can be having a beer or betting on the score of the first set between Vince Spadea and Jarkko Nieminen in a matter of seconds. (There is a betting house on the grounds of the Australian Open where you can put money on just about anything.)

Once on the grounds, you may want to hit the big screen to see where all the action is. While it's impossible to guarantee a court and/or session in advance, if you are going to Wimbledon and you want to see Roger Federer, you won't catch him on Court No. 12 — ever. If you're lucky, though, your favorite player might be on Court No. 18 at Wimbledon or Court No. 3 at the French, two cozy courts that put you close to the action. Of course, Court 1 at the French is the best court on which to watch a match. This year's third round matchup on Court 1 between James Blake and Gael Monfils was absolutely the best match of the tournament. Similarly, last year at the U.S. Open, Davide Sanguinetti beat Paradorn Srichaphan in Louis Armstrong Stadium in a ridiculous four-and-a-half-hour match made all the

more exciting by the intimacy of the setting. But go to the bathroom and grab your food before you sit down. If you arrive early and know the schedule, you will find yourself in the best seat in the house. If your key matchup is in the middle of the day on one of the outside courts, but the match before it is a bit lackluster, brave it through the last few games of the previous match. The next match could be on in less than 10 minutes. Let everyone fill in around you.

If you are traveling a fair distance to attend one of the Slams, you may choose to incorporate activities other than tennis. With that in mind, I recommend staying in the heart of the city. If you are planning on taking public transportation to the events, it may be wise to stay close to the transportation line that takes you to the tennis without having to change trains a ton of times. In London, the Gloucester Road or Earl's Court areas are perfect. In Paris, the Left bank has some wonderful cafes and jazz bars, and it's only 20 minutes to Roland Garros. Melbourne is easy. You can walk from downtown Melbourne to Melbourne Park from almost any hotel in the city. (The players stay at the Grand Hyatt.) In New York, the players' hotel is the Parker Meridien on 57th and 7th.

Could there be four more intriguing cities, or for that matter four more spectacular events within a single sport? No other sport can boast four major championship events in a calendar year with four different surface speeds and a different set of variables associated with each. Golf? Too slow. Tennis is it! Even as a spectator, you can feel it, breathe it and love it almost the same as if you were a tour player yourself — as long as you know the ins and outs.

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