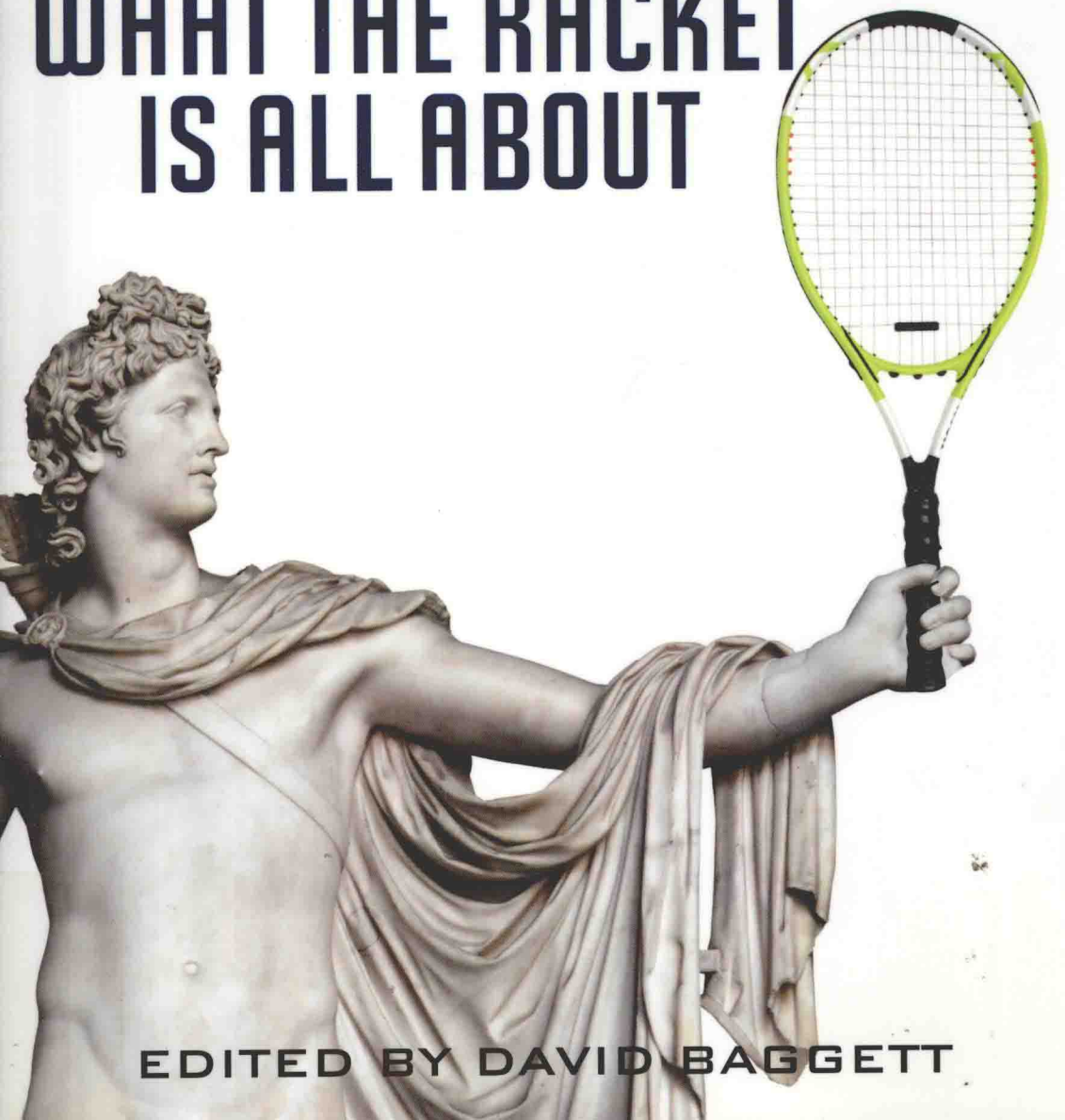
TENNIS AND PHILOSOPHY

WHAT THE RACKET IS ALL ABOUT



EDITED BY DAVID BAGGETT

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To Arthur Ashe

It's no accident . . . that tennis uses the language of life. Advantage, service, fault, break, love, the basic elements of tennis are those of everyday existence, because every match is a life in miniature. Even the structure of tennis, the way the pieces fit inside one another like Russian nesting dolls, mimics the structure of our days. Points become games become sets become tournaments, and it's all so tightly connected that any point can become the turning point. It reminds me of the way seconds become minutes become hours, and any hour can be our finest. Or darkest. It's our choice.

—Andre Agassi, *Open: An Autobiography*

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David Baggett

INTRODUCTION

The Love of Wisdom

From the Red Wings to the Tigers, Michigan is an ideal place for a kid to enjoy sports. It was there that I fell in love with tennis one summer, after my parents had given me and my siblings tennis rackets the Christmas before. I soon played with whomever I could find, usually a hapless neighbor or friend, though one particular friend and I got to enjoy imagining ourselves as Björn Borg and Vitas Gerulaitis, respectively, envisioning throngs of admiring spectators relishing every moment of our little matches.

Something about the game captured my attention right from the start, and I have grown only more and more fond of it through the years. I never played on a tennis team; my high school didn't have one, and in college I was too busy falling in love with philosophy. Tennis always remained a passion for me, even though I was never more than a recreational player—my one personal brush with tennis greatness was a group lesson with Eddie Dibbs, who reached #5 in the world in 1978 (Borg considers his 1977 win over Dibbs in Barcelona one of his ten biggest victories). The sport still mesmerizes me. I love the strategy, the angles, the power, the challenge of it all. The thousand variables, the need for mental resilience, the rugged individualism of it, the back and forth and side to side, the spins and slices and serves—everything about the game enthralls me as a player. Its sheer beauty, and the occasions it affords for excellence, at times have seemed to me nothing less than sublime and not infrequently have brought to mind the way Plato thought that instances of beauty in this world make our hearts ache for its truest source. When anyone ever says it's just a game, I have to smile.

As fanatical as I have been as a player for the last twenty-five years, I am an even bigger fan. Little did I know how magical was the time of professional tennis when I started watching it on television—it wasn't until I went in person to a professional tournament years later and saw the likes of Connors and Vilas that I had the slightest clue how hard these guys hit. I sat spellbound for four hours watching Borg and McEnroe in their classic Wimbledon match in 1980, and I was hooked. More than that, I was enthralled all over again—this time by the way these two polar opposites, fire and ice, could equally arrive at such lofty peaks by such utterly different routes. This dazzling demonstration of tennis brilliance didn't discourage me from ever aspiring to such greatness; rather, I could hardly wait to get out and play afterward. And inspiration to play and improve came not just from the Ice Man and Johnny Mac. I got to watch the Evert-Navratilova rivalry, and the Borg-Connors matchup, and the McEnroe-Lendl challenge. Later came Sampras and Agassi, Graf and Seles, Federer and Nadal, Serena and Venus. I'm still fourteen years old when I watch a match.

A third element added to my love of sports, and tennis in particular, and this one was a direct function of living in Michigan. I still remember the morning, as a teenager, I sat and ate breakfast while I enjoyed the sports section of the newspaper, like I always did growing up, and read an article by a fresh new writer in town. Halfway through the piece I forgot I was reading an article; I was that caught up in it. I knew after reading it that I would start every morning reading this fellow, and immediately I started telling everyone that this guy was special. (When I was in graduate school a few years later, my parents clipped out his articles and mailed them to me.) Indeed he was special, and still is. Soon after arriving in Detroit, he went up for a prestigious sportswriting award and won it, and the next year he was in the running for it again. Nobody had ever won it twice. He did. He's now been named the best sports columnist in the nation a record thirteen times by the Associated Press Sports Edition and won best feature-writing honors from that same outfit seven times, also a record. In fact, no other writer has received the award more than once. So it wasn't long before the whole world knew what Michiganders already did: Mitch Albom was no ordinary sportswriter. His *Tuesdays with Morrie* would show the nation and the world what a remarkable writer he is. Perhaps more than anyone, Mitch developed with-

in me a love for analyzing sport, for "peeling back the human side of sports"—as he put it in that first article I read. Later, after I trained to become a philosopher, it was only a matter of time before I would do some work in the philosophy of sport, tennis in particular, in no small part thanks to him. That's why I wanted to edit this book.

It's been thirty years since I started playing the game, and my love for tennis has only grown. Although I eventually reconciled myself never to even begin attaining the heights of my childhood heroes, tennis was an endless source of delight for me as I played through my twenties and thirties. Tennis has never stopped being a cherished companion along life's way, and I never stopped being a fan of the tennis greats. The older I have grown, the more zealous I have become as a lover of tennis and its history, of those who showed what tennis at its best could be, and of those seminal defining moments when we can't help but marvel at the excellence displayed, the humanness revealed, the beauty exemplified.

Like you, we are aware of swirling allegations of the occasional betting, tanking, or drug issue; the peculiar pitfalls an individualistic sport like tennis is vulnerable to; the way televised tennis, with its ubiquitous microphones, can lay bare a player's psyche for all of us to see and hear—and then either recoil from such displays, recognize our own worst selves at those moments, or both. We're all too aware of the way image can replace substance and advertisers can reward a pretty player or colorful personality more than a more accomplished or quieter player with a stronger character. Such realities are part of the world of tennis as well.

Tennis remains, however, indelibly defined in my mind by its best moments—youngsters shaking hands after a match and remaining friends; partisans acknowledging the brilliant shots of the players they're rooting against; a player correcting a line call in favor of his opponent; children of apartheid seeing a black man win a tournament and feeling hope; a girl's eyes brightening watching the likes of a Steffi Graf or Serena Williams win Wimbledon; an Andre Agassi using his earnings to start a school for underprivileged kids; a Billie Jean King showing the world a woman could beat a man; a Pete Sampras courageously fighting on while losing his best friend to cancer; the artistry of a Roger Federer or John McEnroe; the dignity of a Rod Laver or Arthur Ashe; the tenacity and talent of a Martina Navratilova or Venus Williams; the resilience of a Monica Seles, James Blake, or Justine Henin.

As a philosopher, I have long thought that tennis provides a practically ideal springboard to discuss issues that matter. Philosophy, etymologically, is the "love of wisdom," and tennis can help us glean insights into wisdom—perhaps more than you might imagine. David Foster Wallace's blurb for the book *Tennis and the Meaning of Life* was perfect: "My only complaint is the title's redundant." Our book aims to allow even longtime lovers of tennis to remember what drew them into the game, what about this dance of serves and volleys is so exciting, and how tennis can perhaps indeed shed a little light on the meaning of life.

Our goal in this book is to use tennis for discussing philosophy, but we are equally aiming, in our discussion, to accord tennis the pride of place it deserves as a worthwhile and valuable end in itself, a showcase of intrinsic goods like excellence, sportsmanship, and beauty. All of the contributors, in addition to being philosophers, are lovers of the game who have no intention to downplay the elegance or importance of tennis itself. In each chapter we strive to share knowledge of the game while showing a heartfelt respect for its history and inherent worth. Even when we are critical of the behaviors of certain players, we tend to craft sufficiently nuanced analyses in order that we never come across as categorically critical. Moreover, as philosophers and fans, we aim to highlight distinctive features of tennis itself, rather than aspects of sports more generally, and in this way too, we hope to draw in readers who are lovers of the game. In the process we strive to offer substantive philosophical analyses, with ample tennis examples to make the medicine go down smoothly, along with plenty of practical wisdom and fun along the way.

There's something for everyone here, even an interview with Brad Gilbert! We're delighted to start off the fun with the legendary David Foster Wallace piece, "Federer as Religious Experience." In the Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, Rhode Island, a whole room is devoted to the famous King versus Riggs Battle of the Sexes, perhaps the most important tennis match ever played. We devote a chapter to it here. We also discuss race and gender, beauty and virtue, excellence and sportsmanship. We explore temper tantrums and the ugly aspects of competition, pushy tennis parents, and improper behavior of fans. We delve into the artistic and aesthetic aspects of tennis, the intrinsic goods of the game, and its social relevance. We ask and try to answer the question of who was the all-time greatest tennis player, whether there will ever be a great

tennis movie, the infamous and tragic Seles stabbing; we look at the impact of technology, the evolution of the game, the ethics and etiquette of rage, the vice of gamesmanship. We peel back the personal dimension of the game, focus our attention on some moments when tennis transcended sport, and other moments when it revealed both the potential and pitfalls of the human condition, and generally use tennis as a springboard to consider questions that matter. As lovers of philosophy and tennis, it was our pleasure to write such a book, and we hope you derive as much enjoyment from reading it.

David Foster Wallace

FEDERER AS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Almost anyone who loves tennis and follows the men's tour on television has, over the last few years, had what might be termed Federer Moments. These are times, as you watch the young Swiss play, when the jaw drops and eyes protrude and sounds are made that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you're O.K.

The Moments are more intense if you've played enough tennis to understand the impossibility of what you just saw him do. We've all got our examples. Here is one. It's the finals of the 2005 U.S. Open, Federer serving to Andre Agassi early in the fourth set. There's a medium-long exchange of groundstrokes, one with the distinctive butterfly shape of today's power-baseline game, Federer and Agassi yanking each other from side to side, each trying to set up the baseline winner . . . until suddenly Agassi hits a hard heavy cross-court backhand that pulls Federer way out wide to his ad (=left) side, and Federer gets to it but slices the stretch backhand short, a couple feet past the service line, which of course is the sort of thing Agassi dines out on, and as Federer's scrambling to reverse and get back to center, Agassi's moving in to take the short ball on the rise, and he smacks it hard right back into the same ad corner, trying to wrong-foot Federer, which in fact he does—Federer's still near the corner but running toward the centerline, and the ball's heading to a point behind him now, where he just was, and there's no time to turn his body around, and Agassi's following the shot in to the net at an angle from the backhand side . . . and what Federer now does is somehow in-

stantly reverse thrust and sort of skip backward three or four steps, impossibly fast, to hit a forehand out of his backhand corner, all his weight moving backward, and the forehand is a topspin screamer down the line past Agassi at net, who lunges for it but the ball's past him, and it flies straight down the sideline and lands exactly in the deuce corner of Agassi's side, a winner—Federer's still dancing backward as it lands. And there's that familiar little second of shocked silence from the New York crowd before it erupts, and John McEnroe with his color man's headset on TV says (mostly to himself, it sounds like), "How do you hit a winner from that position?" And he's right: given Agassi's position and world-class quickness, Federer had to send that ball down a two-inch pipe of space in order to pass him, which he did, moving backwards, with no setup time and none of his weight behind the shot. It was impossible. It was like something out of *The Matrix*. I don't know what-all sounds were involved, but my spouse says she hurried in and there was popcorn all over the couch and I was down on one knee and my eyeballs looked like novelty-shop eyeballs.

Anyway, that's one example of a Federer Moment, and that was merely on TV—and the truth is that TV tennis is to live tennis pretty much as video porn is to the felt reality of human love.

Journalistically speaking, there is no hot news to offer you about Roger Federer. He is, at 25, the best tennis player currently alive. Maybe the best ever. Bios and profiles abound. *60 Minutes* did a feature on him just last year. Anything you want to know about Mr. Roger N.M.I. Federer—his background, his home town of Basel, Switzerland, his parents' sane and unexploitative support of his talent, his junior tennis career, his early problems with fragility and temper, his beloved junior coach, how that coach's accidental death in 2002 both shattered and annealed Federer and helped make him what he now is, Federer's 39 career singles titles, his eight Grand Slams, his unusually steady and mature commitment to the girlfriend who travels with him (which on the men's tour is rare) and handles his affairs (which on the men's tour is unheard of), his old-school stoicism and mental toughness and good sportsmanship and evident overall decency and thoughtfulness and charitable largess—it's all just a Google search away. Knock yourself out.

This present article is more about a spectator's experience of Federer, and its context. The specific thesis here is that if you've never seen the

young man play live, and then do, in person, on the sacred grass of Wimbledon, through the literally withering heat and then wind and rain of the '06 fortnight, then you are apt to have what one of the tournament's press bus drivers describes as a "bloody near-religious experience." It may be tempting, at first, to hear a phrase like this as just one more of the overheated tropes that people resort to to describe the feeling of Federer Moments. But the driver's phrase turns out to be true—literally, for an instant ecstatically—though it takes some time and serious watching to see this truth emerge.

Beauty is not the goal of competitive sports, but high-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty. The relation is roughly that of courage to war.

The human beauty we're talking about here is beauty of a particular type; it might be called kinetic beauty. Its power and appeal are universal. It has nothing to do with sex or cultural norms. What it seems to have to do with, really, is human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body.[1]

Of course, in men's sports no one ever talks about beauty or grace or the body. Men may profess their "love" of sports, but that love must always be cast and enacted in the symbology of war: elimination vs. advance, hierarchy of rank and standing, obsessive statistics, technical analysis, tribal and/or nationalist fervor, uniforms, mass noise, banners, chest-thumping, face-painting, etc. For reasons that are not well understood, war's codes are safer for most of us than love's. You too may find them so, in which case Spain's mesomorphic and totally martial Rafael Nadal is the man's man for you—he of the unsleeved biceps and Kabuki self-exhortations. Plus Nadal is also Federer's nemesis and the big surprise of this year's Wimbledon, since he's a clay-court specialist and no one expected him to make it past the first few rounds here. Whereas Federer, through the semifinals, has provided no surprise or competitive drama at all. He's outplayed each opponent so completely that the TV and print press are worried his matches are dull and can't compete effectively with the nationalist fervor of the World Cup.[2]

July 9's men's final, though, is everyone's dream. Nadal vs. Federer is a replay of last month's French Open final, which Nadal won. Federer has so far lost only four matches all year, but they've all been to Nadal. Still, most of these matches have been on slow clay, Nadal's best surface.

Grass is Federer's best. On the other hand, the first week's heat has baked out some of the Wimbledon courts' slickness and made them slower. There's also the fact that Nadal has adjusted his clay-based game to grass—moving in closer to the baseline on his groundstrokes, amping up his serve, overcoming his allergy to the net. He just about disemboweled Agassi in the third round. The networks are in ecstasies. Before the match, on Centre Court, behind the glass slits above the south backstop, as the linesmen are coming out on court in their new *Ralph Lauren* uniforms that look so much like children's navalwear, the broadcast commentators can be seen practically bouncing up and down in their chairs. This Wimbledon final's got the revenge narrative, the king-versus-regicide dynamic, the stark character contrasts. It's the passionate machismo of southern Europe versus the intricate clinical artistry of the north. Apollo and Dionysus. Scalpel and cleaver. Righty and southpaw. Nos. 1 and 2 in the world. Nadal, the man who's taken the modern power-baseline game just as far as it goes, versus a man who's transfigured that modern game, whose precision and variety are as big a deal as his pace and foot-speed, but who may be peculiarly vulnerable to, or psyched out by, that first man. A British sportswriter, exulting with his mates in the press section, says, twice, "It's going to be a war."

Plus it's in the cathedral of Centre Court. And the men's final is always on the fortnight's second Sunday, the symbolism of which Wimbledon emphasizes by always omitting play on the first Sunday. And the spattery gale that has knocked over parking signs and everted umbrellas all morning suddenly quits an hour before match time, the sun emerging just as Centre Court's tarp is rolled back and the net posts driven home.

Federer and Nadal come out to applause, make their ritual bows to the nobles' box. The Swiss is in the buttermilk-colored sport coat that Nike's gotten him to wear for Wimbledon this year. On Federer, and perhaps on him alone, it doesn't look absurd with shorts and sneakers. The Spaniard eschews all warm-up clothing, so you have to look at his muscles right away. He and the Swiss are both in all-Nike, up to the very same kind of tied white Nike hankie with the swoosh positioned above the third eye. Nadal tucks his hair under his hankie, but Federer doesn't, and smoothing and fussing with the bits of hair that fall over the hankie is the main Federer tic TV viewers get to see; likewise Nadal's obsessive retreat to the ballboy's towel between points. There happen to be other