

Tennis, Anyone?

A good infatuation runs deep

Head to the left, head to the right. Some people think that's all there is to watching tennis. Wimbledon, the oldest and most prestigious championship in the sport, ended earlier this month (go, Venus!), and I can tell you there's more to tennis than the strange love-15-30-40 point system. Look a little closer, and you'll see what it's all about: the women.

I suppose someone should've recognized that my obsession with the Navratilova-Evert rivalry in the '80s was unusual—what kid can sit and watch a ball fly up and down the screen for hours at a time? A baby lesbian, who got a kick out of their shrill cries or guttural grunts, grew up admiring the tenacity and strength of the world's finest skirted athletes.

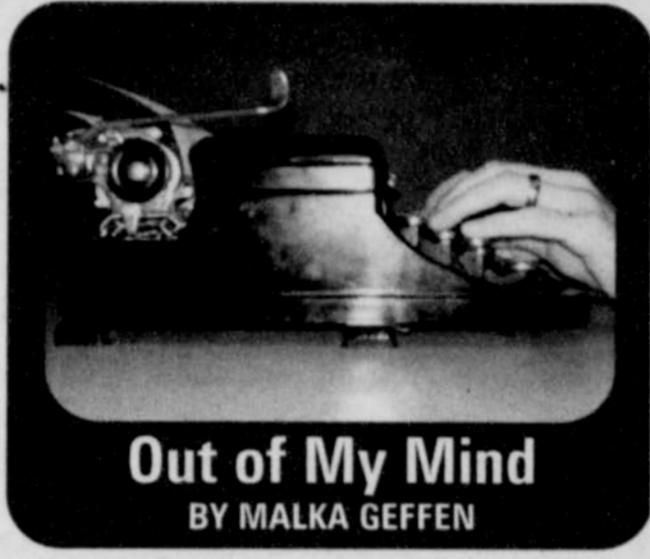
I can't play the game to save my life. Never could. I remember wanting lessons as a kid but balking at the concept of scuttling after balls in the Arizona sun. In college, I convinced my high school crush (and soon-to-be first girlfriend) to give me private tennis lessons. Oh, the warm nights of young desire. I have no idea if my game improved, but I distinctly recall her complimenting my scent after an hour of practice. (I've never given due credit to Degree deodorant for that.)

First Girlfriend and some friends and I saw the pro play live at the Acura Classic tournament in San Diego in 1993. Steffi Graf, who won that tournament, was a graceful, unbeatable player who broke my heart when she married tennis pro Andre Agasi. But I had plenty of other players to occupy my interest that day. Argentine beauty Gabriela Sabatini and Spanish butch Arantxa Sanchez Vicario were there. I can't find hard proof that they're my Amazonian sisters, but thanks to a 1995 Associated Press article, I believe Conchita Martinez and gal pal Gigi Fernandez play doubles on the Isle of Lesbos.

Another pro's career I've been following is that of France's Amelie Mauresmo. She burst onto the women's tennis scene when she overtook Martina Hingis for the championship at the Australian Open in 1999. "Worldwide media paid little attention to the quality of Mauresmo's tennis at the time, choosing to overlook her on-court accomplishments in favor of her personal life. The young Frenchwoman who was taking Australia by storm was also openly gay," wrote Wyman Meers for OutSports.com.

But no coming out will ever be as media-thronged (or as expected) as that of Martina Navratilova in 1981. Afraid to hinder her U.S. citizenship, Navratilova, one of the best women tennis players of all time, first came out as bisexual in 1980 when pushed by the press. As a result, she did not receive the sponsorships one would expect for a player of her stature, but she turned around and won a record 15 singles tournaments and 14 doubles tournaments in one year.

Also in 1981, tennis legend Billie Jean King was



Out of My Mind
BY MALKA GEFFEN

outed by an ex-lover who filed a palimony suit. Although she called the affair a "mistake" and remained in the closet, she lost almost all her commercial sponsors. In 1998 King finally came all the way out of the closet, which in my opinion was made easier, in part, by Navratilova's success.

In her career, Navratilova won 168 singles titles—more than any other player, male or female. In 2000 she won the National Equality Award from the Human Rights Campaign. In her acceptance speech she said: "People often ask me, 'Now that I've come out, what more can I do?' My answer to that would be, 'Encourage others to come out' and to be active, supportive members of our community, which in turn helps contribute positive change and ultimately to fair and equal opportunities for us all."

As the new breed of gorgeous blond teenage Russian tennis pros climbs the ranks, and I say goodbye to old favorites (they're my age!) like Jennifer Capriati, Monica Seles and Lindsay



Amelie Mauresmo, last year's Wimbledon champion, is one of a few out and proud tennis pros.

Davenport, I have to remember that a few out players do not guarantee an accepting sports world. You'll notice (they're in tight shorts, for chrissake!) that no male tennis players are out as gay. The last known gay men's tennis player was Bill Tilden, a champion in the 1920s. But the men's tour of the Association of Tennis Professionals is officially opposed to any type of discrimination against its players, so you male tennis lovers out there can keep watching, like I do, with hope and a rubberneck. **10**

Staff Writer MALKA GEFFEN has plenty of room in her head. Fill it by e-mailing malkageffen@gmail.com.

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