My Favorite World #10



The athletics-entertainment machine, especially at the professional level, never fails to bring us a parade of behaviors that, if it were our own children acting out so, would make us want to crawl behind the nearest rock in shame and disgrace. Every game from bouncing balls to twirling on the ice to driving around in circles real fast has its Hall of Shame inductees. Go back at least to Ty Cobb<fn>At least…we have no way of knowing, but I'm willing to bet that the guys who were winning marathons in ancient Greece were probably over-indulged boobs themselves.</fn> and bring it on up to today.

It makes sense. Elite athletes are among the most pampered and cosseted class of people around. They've spent most of their lives being told how special they are. When they find themselves in trouble, there are often legions of protectors to make their troubles go away.<fn>As long as they continue to perform, naturally. Failure to excel means exile. It's a helluva motivator.</fn>

It's one part of why I really don't follow the sports world in any detail. I'll watch a game here and there (hockey is once again tickling my interest for an hour at a time), but I really don't care what happens.<fn>As long as the fucking Yankees take a kick to the junk on a regular basis. Fuck the fucking Yankees.</fn>

Except for tennis. I love tennis, and this week finds us midway through the Australian Open, the first major tournament

of the year. The time difference makes watching it live a little hard, but I check the results every day, even after my second favorite player ever – and perhaps the best ever, period – Roger Federer was eliminated. Watching him play has been a big piece of My Favorite World for years.<fn>Also, too…David Foster Wallace wrote a profile of Federer for the NYTimes magazine years ago, and it's my favorite piece of writing on any sport, ever. Do yourself a favor…</fn> But even with Federer out of the tournament, there's still plenty to love.

What really makes tennis stand out right now is that most of the top players in the men's game consistently behave with remarkable style and grace. Don't misunderstand. Tennis is filled with entitled schmucks, just like any other sport.<fn>The elite women have more than a fair share of prima donnas, though there are a few coming along now who threaten to upend the game with style, wit, and grace. Eugenie Bouchard and Madison Keys…I'm looking at you, ladies. Brava!</fn> Of the top five men, four always show class and sportsmanship. Federer's speaking, like his game, is elegant and deceptively smooth. Rafael Nadal, who may be the second best player ever behind Federer, has had the good luck to have a rival in Federer who brings out his own generous and elegant nature. Novak Djokovich,who's making his own case for joining the 'best ever' bracket, settled in as third wheel in this rivalry with incredible humor and a style all his own. And now, Stan Warwinka is making a run at the top tier, and as a Davis Cup teammate and countryman of Federer, he's had a great role model for how to behave like a champion.<fn>Pro tip: it has nothing to do with stepping on an opponent lying on the ground, for example.</fn>

These guys, especially the top 3 of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovich, demonstrate great skill and ruthless intensity on the court, but it never devolves into trash talking or strutting. <fn>I deliberately do not include Andy Murray in

this group. His playing is often superb. But geebus, what a whiny dick.</fn>

The piece of the Aussie Open that really hits My Favorite World this week came in an early round match between Nadal and Tim Smyczek, ranked 112th in the world, present in the Open through the grueling qualifier process, and given no realistic chance of beating the top-ranked Nadal. But he gave Rafa a hard match, and was within reach of a fifth set victory. And as Nadal was struggling to win the set up 6-5, someone in the crowd let out an intentionally distracting shriek as Nadal was in his serve motion. He shanked the serve. And Smyczek, who could have used the moment to regain the advantage, did what too many people call "unthinkable". As the crowd was booing the noisy jerk for his rudeness, Smyczek raised two fingers to indicate that Nadal should receive a do-over on the disrupted serve.

This is about the same as offering a batter a fourth strike, or letting an opposing team have another shot at first down because something was distracting. Try to imagine any other sport where someone within a whisker of pulling off the greatest victory of his career would do such a thing.

The chair umpire was amazed. The crowd was amazed. Nadal's team gave Smyczek a standing ovation. Even Nadal was amazed, but given a reprieve he quickly served the game out for the match. Think of it…you're *that close* to beating one of the best in the history of the game, and you elect sportsmanship over cutthroat. Asked after the match why he did what he did, Smyczek replied:

> *I know my parents would have killed me if I didn't. It was the right thing to do."*

We grow weary of watching people time and again twist conditions to gain advantage – because to let the opportunity to take advantage pass by has come to be adjudged 'loser'

behavior. We are often certain that we are being lied to or manipulated by people who long ago ran out of shits to give about whether or not their parents would approve of their choices. But here, in this favorite game of mine, involving one of my favorite players, an unknown kid from the Midwest made himself one of my new favorites through a simple act of decency.

Courtesy. Decency. Style and grace. Tim Smyczek. My Favorite World.