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Michael Giltz | BIO | I'M A FAN OF THIS BLOGGER

Sports: How to Fix Tennis

Posted August 31, 2007 | 05:26 PM (EST)

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For a brief moment, tennis will be visible in America. Labor Day weekend is traditionally the most popular time at the U.S. Open. And the U.S. Open is the tournament that draws the most fans. So this weekend is the epicenter of tennis. And the sport is doing great. Roger Federer is making history, the Williams sisters are making their umpteenth comebacks, a new mini-season of events leading up to the Open is doing well on television and innovations, like player challenges of calls, have shown the sport isn't resting on its laurels.

But in fact, tennis as a sport is a joke. On any given week, golfers compete for a million dollar purse, an amount tennis stars only see four times a year at the Grand Slams. TV ratings go up and down year to year but the majors like Wimbledon and the French Open can barely compete with a regular season matchup between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees on ESPN. And a new wave of stars have arrived...from Serbia.

Given its popularity as a sport -- millions play every week and unlike golf it's very inexpensive to play and unlike baseball or basketball or soccer and most other sports you only need one other person to play with -- tennis is nowhere near as popular as it should be.

That's the bad news. The good news is that everyone knows what needs to be done to fix tennis. They just haven't done it yet. It's going to take a major figure like Billie Jean King being given real power and about five years or so to re-align the entire sport. But if they do it, tennis will explode in excitement. Here's the to-do list:

- 1. Get a commissioner** - Tennis needs someone in charge, just like every other sport.
- 2. Combine the men's and women's tour** - It's better for fans, creates better events and provides much bigger draws. Separating them by gender is outdated, silly and spoils one of the pleasures of the sport: that men and women can both easily provide top-notch entertainment.
- 3. Move the Australian Open** - Everyone knows it has to be done. The Aussie Open takes place during the punishing heat of summer. It needs to be moved to October and be the final Slam of the season. (Stop whining, U.S. Open. If it's better for the sport,

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ultimately it's better for you.)

4. Shorten the season - Top players are forced to play certain events to protect their points. Many athletes are plagued with injuries and careers are drastically shortened because tennis has an absurd schedule with barely four weeks off a year. You can keep off-season events for minor players who need the money. The season will end in November with the traditional mini-tournament of the top eight men and women players. So players will have December to February off and start up again in mid or late March. Or even April!

5. Reduce the number of tournaments - Right now, players often play a final on Sunday and have to start a new tournament on Monday. For various reasons, this means the winner of one tournament immediately bows out of the next one by default and paying a penalty (if they can afford it) or simply being too exhausted to get past the first round. This hurts everyone.

6. Have mini-seasons on each surface - The hardcourt season leading up to the U.S. Open has been a big success. Suddenly, fans know there will be tennis on TV regularly and it actually makes sense -- oh, players gain points and get ready for the U.S. Open and can win bonus money there the more points they gain beforehand. Do this for all the majors. A clay season leading up to the French, a grass season leading up to Wimbledon, a hardcourt season leading up to the U.S. Open and if we must have indoor tennis, an indoor/hardcourt season leading up to the Aussie Open. Tennis is an international sport and if you want to celebrate one of its unique features -- the fact that it's played on three very different surfaces -- then do it right. (I'd also toss in a tournament with wooden rackets, but that should be an exhibition match, I suppose.)

7. Get those cameras on every line at every major as soon as possible - The player challenges to calls have proven a huge plus. Not only does it reduce terrible errors (which are inevitable with humans in charge), but it's also reduced complaining and whining from the players. They don't moan about certain calls, they just challenge them. It's reduced arguing and increased respect all around.

8. Revisit medical time-outs - As proven in the epic James Blake-Fabrice Santoro five-setter Thursday night, the medical time-out is being wildly abused and has turned into a de facto time-out, something tennis doesn't need since players get to rest every other game.

9. Treat the Davis Cup like the All-Star break - turn this tournament between the top players of each country into a real event that takes place every two years (or three years or four years) and plop it into the middle of the season. It's tremendously valuable for the worldwide growth of the game and U.S. fans will support a little jingoism if given a chance. Right now, 99 percent of the U.S. fans haven't a clue when Davis Cup is played.

10. Tear down Arthur Ashe Stadium - It's not just the worst tennis stadium, it may well be the worst sports stadium built in years. Most of the seats are in the upper section and they're so high up it's literally impossible to follow a match. That's why the fans are so noisy at the U.S. Open -- they're bored out of their minds. It's so cavernous that it's literally a joke -- people sitting there wonder if clouds will obscure their view. Even the lower levels for the fat cats are poorly designed, with concrete expanses so wide that the seats look half empty even when people are in them. They didn't even bother to think about a retractable roof and design Arthur Ashe so one could be added later -- if they chose -- for a reasonable amount of money. Tear it down and start again. It's an insult to the great player that the stadium was named after.

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[baldblackman](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of baldblackman](#) [permalink](#)

Who cares about tennis (or any pro sport for that matter)? I think all pro sports should be shown on pay per view. Just think about how wonderful it would be not to have your favorite shows interrupted by overtime or playoffs? Once all the sports are off regular tv, the crappy ads for beer and E.D.drugs will have to follow their audience.

[Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 05:03 PM on 09/05/2007

[Honza](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Honza](#) [permalink](#)

It's now Sunday and I'm about ready to watch the Venus Williams And the Ivanovic match. I'm dissapointed with the Tennis Channel, expensive and don't carry all the tournaments. Also I've been watching tennis and love the game for more years then McEnroe has been on this earth, only wish he would curb his comments, this morning he and his cronys must have had breakfast of Aunt Jemmina pancakes, the way they laud the black players. my favorite is Blake. went to bed early Saturday nite missed the outcome? Oh well, best for an ole vet is calm down and watch the gals play.

[Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 04:04 PM on 09/02/2007

[Clever Screen Name](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Clever Screen Name](#) [permalink](#)

Sorry, I have typed Giltz' name wrong twice now. My apologies.

[Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 12:23 PM on 09/02/2007

[Michael Giltz](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Well, no one will ever get Clever Screen Name wrong. (Clever, that.) But no need to apologize -- it gets written as Glitz 99% of the time and otherwise guiltz and Giults and anything else you can imagine except Giltz.

[Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 01:09 AM on 09/03/2007

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As for racquet tension, I found it intriguing since I'd never heard anyone suggest that before as an equalizer for the game. In fact, it would hurt the game by limiting playing styles to a degree. Serve and volleyers use tighter tension so they have more control. Base-liners use looser tension so they can whack away. Tensions range from 50 to 72 or so for many, many players. Limiting tension to a certain range wouldn't make the game more fun, it would just hurt players who want to embrace various styles of play, I'm afraid, according to the former player and current coach I asked. It's a non-starter.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 10:56 AM on 09/02/2007

emerywood See Profile I'm a Fan of emerywood permalink

Mr. Giltz,

I appreciate the time you are taking to respond to some correspondents. It makes the whole experience of give and take much more interesting and alive. Besides, we learn something from you ; another perspective and they are all refreshing.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 08:58 PM on 09/01/2007

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Thanks for reading. I think commenting and addressing ideas people raise is half the fun of blogging. I write articles for newspapers where there's little to no give and take and this is a lot more fun.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 10:34 AM on 09/02/2007

Clever Screen Name See Profile I'm a Fan of Clever Screen Name permalink

Man, there have been many idiotic comments to this article. Giltz has come up with a number of very good ideas for improving the game. But anybody who doesn't think tennis is great now isn't watching. You have a guy like Federer contending for G.O.A.T., an excellent rivalry with the outstanding Nadal, who plays in a completely different style; other guys hovering near the top who are high-quality players (Djokovic, Roddick, Blake, et al.). The women's tour has the female Federer, Henin, the Williams sisters, Jancovic, the various -ovas, a pretty strong field in the top ten overall. Everybody mentioned has a completely unique style with different skill sets and abilities: the days of baseline banging have passed (the new kid Donald Young is even a serve-and-volley-er!). It is not a pure power game anymore on either side, not that there was ever anything wrong with that. Baseline play, a la Agassi, was about extending the points to allow your opponent to falter and, eventually, fatigue later on. There is tremendous tension in those long rallies. And wooden rackets? Please, everybody, stop repeating that old saw. Have you watched a classic match recently? BORING. Like watching basketball from the 50s. Limiting string tension? Why? That's limiting how hard someone can hit the ball, like limiting how fast someone can run the bases. It doesn't make any sense. Not only is it not necessary (Roddick has a 150-mph serve and all the top players have found an answer for it, otherwise he would win all the time), it actually requires more skill to control a ball hit that hard and more skill to return it. Tennis is at a zenith in terms of the skill required to compete at the top level. Hingis, a great champion of the late 90s, can't seriously be considered a threat anymore -- that's how much the game has advanced in just a few years. Watching Federer play Nadal is better than anything in the history of the sport, Mac/Connors or Evert/Navratilova be damned.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 08:48 PM on 09/01/2007

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I think some of those classic matches are still fun to watch. But you're absolutely right that the level of play and varied styles out there today is terrific and a lot of fun to watch. Every once in a while you'll get some extremely tall guy like Isner and the match will be a little odd (though it was fun to watch Federer bream him down) or someone with a massive serve and no game will get through a few rounds. But that sort of thing happens in any sport. Eventually, everyone figures out the new pitcher or the new batter and things settle back to normal where a well-rounded game is needed. Federer versus Nadal is indeed a rivalry for the ages and the idea that it's no fun because Federer isn't wacky off court or viewers in the US don't care because they're not American is absurd. It's great for the sport.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 10:32 AM on 09/02/2007

provgrays See Profile I'm a Fan of provgrays permalink

Equipment can adversely effect and dramatically change a professional sport. Golfers are better than they have ever been, but advances in equipment in that sport have rendered formerly challenging courses too easy.

Why do you think baseball still uses wooden bats? Because the advantage would be too much in the hitter's favor if they used aluminum bats.

Equipment effects the delicate balance of a the competitive and strategic dynamics of any sport. Calling an argument "idiotic" is not an argument at all. Argue your case on the merits instead of resorting to insults.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 09:59 AM on 09/02/2007

👤 Clever Screen Name See Profile I'm a Fan of Clever Screen Name [permalink](#)

Of course equipment can affect and alter the dynamics of a sport. But my point is, this is not for the worse. Your baseball bat counter doesn't really apply to tennis, because while an aluminum bat favors the hitter (if he can hit the ball, no easy task, harder now than ever), the dimensions of the park are fixed and the objective is to hit it out of the boundaries of the park. So aluminum makes part of your job easier. In tennis, no matter how hard you hit the ball, you must still control it and bring it within the boundaries of the court. So, with power, not only has your opponent's task grown more difficult, so has yours. This is not true of baseball or golf. But Giltz' issue was with viewership, not that tennis is worse now than when McEnroe played because we have graphite and players that actually, you know, work out. That is clearly not the case.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 12:21 PM on 09/02/2007

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👤 Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz [permalink](#)

Some have questioned my desire to combine the men's and women's tours, pointing out that most clubs they play at could't accomodate both men and women. Simply not enough courts. My idea is that the tours should be combined and hit the same cities at the same time, starting with major sites where clubs close to each other would feature the top tours at the same time -- men at one site, women at the other and they'd alternate for the quarters or semis on each year. Slowly bring the tour together when you can find cities and stops that have two clubs (many major places in the south and west can indeed boast of more than two clubs ready for this sort of tournament right now). You've got to let current contracts elapse, so it would be a slow process taking a decade. But eventually all or most of the tours should take place in teh same cities at the same time. Eventually, you might even find venues competing to lure the tours by building facilities that could handle both, though obviously this would take time. But it happened with the Lipton Tournmanet in South Florida (sometimes dubbed the fifth slam) and it could happen elsewhere.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 05:44 PM on 09/01/2007

👤 hiprogloho See Profile I'm a Fan of hiprogloho [permalink](#)

In this grave new world, tennis suffers from the same disease as the rest of pop culture---the evil-is-hip, hip hop generation which celebrates sports...like dog fighting.

So it's no wonder not very many highly ranked American kids are playing these days. Sadly, tennis, like soccer, has become too much of a global sport for it to matter or fans to care.

In the past, equipment was less flighty and more standardized with smaller wood frames. Today raw power rather than chess match strategy is at such a premium that most players are human baseliner ball machines and net play is a lost art.

This game is a pale imitation of what it was in the era of Borg, Johnny Mac and company. Back then the sport was more colorful from the press to the characters to the venues to the epic moments.

Give up already. The best of America has come and gone. Tennis has a rich history. But the foreign racquet sport they play today is not worth obsessing over unless you're covering the slams in Europe.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 05:07 PM on 09/01/2007

👤 Clever Screen Name See Profile I'm a Fan of Clever Screen Name [permalink](#)

This might be the most ridiculous post of the lot. Not one thing you've written makes any bit of sense.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 08:51 PM on 09/03/2007

👤 Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz [permalink](#)

Nothing? Not even when I agreed with you that the Borg-Mac era was sensational and what first made me fall in love with the game? Believing that when top players come from all over the world (and not just the US) is a plus for the sport, just like

seeing top basketball players coming from China and the UK or top baseball players coming from Japan and Latin countries is a good thing? Why not? What's ridiculous about wanting to see a sport like tennis or baseball challenge soccer for worldwide popularity?

 Favorite  Flag as abusive Posted 09:58 PM on 09/04/2007

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I think tennis becoming a world-wide sport is a plus, not a negative. The US -- like every other country -- will have moments when their stars shine and moments when they don't. But people don't care whether their soccer stars are Beckham or Ronaldo, whether their baseball stars are Hideki Matsui or some new kid from Cuba -- great talent is fun to watch. The Borg, Mac era was the era I grew up in and love. But I've never seen more beautiful tennis than the game being played by Federer right now.

 Favorite  Flag as abusive Posted 05:41 PM on 09/01/2007

 **CraigHickman** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of CraigHickman](#) [permalink](#)

Tennis is one of the easiest sports to fix for betting purposes. I think it's more widespread than we currently know.

As for the original post:

Kudos. I can't say I disagree with any of the changes you suggest.

I do think there should be more play on grass and indoor carpet because those surfaces are more forgiving on the body than both hardcourts (too hard on the joints) and clay (too grueling, the points just go on far too long). Grass has become slow enough that baseliners without huge serves can still produce results and indoor carpet is well... carpet.

Thanks for the provocative discussion.

 Favorite  Flag as abusive Posted 01:53 PM on 09/01/2007

 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

With just two people playing, I suppose you're right about fixing being easy. That is really going to be depressing if it's widespread. I'm a huge baseball fan and steroids drive me bonkers. I do believe it will be limited to mid-level players who needed the money. I doubt the major stars were approached or agreed, so it will be the difference between #37 losing to #110. Hopefully. Thanks for reading.

 Favorite  Flag as abusive Posted 02:57 PM on 09/01/2007

 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Lots of people have brought up the idea that tennis is boring now because of the racquets and strings and power games with massive serves and no rallies. As I've said already, Federer is changing that. I think a whole generation will grow up developing rounded games that use finesse and style and the whole court just like he does. But the biggest blind spot in this argument is the women's game. I can remember the days when Tracey Austin and Andrea Jaegar would hit moonballs for hours at a time, driving fans to boo in boredom. Chris Evert was a unique, exciting talent but her game inspired imitators who couldn't bring anywhere near the excitement she did to a baseline game. It took Martina Navratilova, Chrissie re-inventing herself to face that challenge and the host of innovators who followed to reinvent women's tennis. The women's side is FAR more exciting than it has ever been, with a lot more athleticism and excitement and full court play but without losing the strategy and style that can make the sport so exciting. I think the men's side is recovering from the massive serve/no rally era. I'd love to see a tournament played with wooden racquets, but overall (especially when you take into account the women's side) I think tennis is as fun as ever to watch. And to be realistic, there is no way the players or the sponsors (ie tennis racquet manufacturers) will let composite racquets be banned. It's a non-starter.

 Favorite  Flag as abusive Posted 12:39 PM on 09/01/2007

 **provgrays** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of provgrays](#) [permalink](#)

You raise solid points and I love the wooden racket idea. I think we agree that a well rounded game with power, touch, strategy, guile and exciting matches should be the goal.

The grunting is incredibly annoying. McEnroe is a very insightful commentator. I loved to watch him play and he was so innovative on the court, I suffered through his histrionics and

still enjoyed him.


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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Thanks for reading. I was NOT a fan of McEnroe in his heyday -- I was all about Borg. But I think he's a good commentator too. Almost as good as Carillo.

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 **der Alte** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of der Alte](#) [permalink](#)

Fix tennis? too late. it's headed the way boxing & all our other national sports went---crushed under the weight of bucks. Connors didn't help it any, & Venus is putting in her nail to the coffin.

 [Favorite](#)  [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 11:34 AM on 09/01/2007

 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Well, like boxing there is a growing betting scandal surrounding tennis. Hopefully it'll prove to not be widespread. As of yet, I think the sport still has a lot of integrity, which boxing los due to rigged matches and the splintering of title fights into Alice in Wonderland type nonsense.

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 **AmericanSon** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of AmericanSon](#) [permalink](#)

Tennis needs Bobby Riggs, in addition to Billie Jean King. Without Bobby Riggs, Billie Jean would not be remembered today.

Golf? Compared to watching tennis, watching golf is like watching the grass grow. (And the announcer whispers, "Yes John, I do believe I saw a blade of grass move.") Ho hum, snorrrrr....

 [Favorite](#)  [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 11:25 AM on 09/01/2007

 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Well, Fabrice Santoro carried on the wily tradition of Bobby Riggs and Ilie Nastaste with great elan during that Blake match. I find golf terribly boring too. And yes, the Battle of the Sexes match between Billie Jean and Bobby Riggs is an iconic pop culture moment -- heck they even made a TV movie about it. But I strongly disagree that if it weren't for Bobby that people wouldn't remember Billie Jean King. She is easily one of the greatest players of all time, with 12 Slams, 16 Slam doubles and 11 Slam mixed doubles titles to her credit, not to mention a career Grand Slam. Her activism in promoting women's sports in general has been profoundly influential. The innovations of World Team Tennis have carried off to the sport at large and she's still tremendously important and influential today. Few athletes in any sport have the legacy both on and off the competitive field that Billie Jean King does.

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 **Vajara** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Vajara](#) [permalink](#)

These are all good ideas to fix tennis; however, for those of us who love the game and enjoy watching it on tv, the sport should say goodbye to John McEnroe. This guy never stops talking and continues to rant about his past during the matches. It's as though they don't even care what is happening on the court. He and his partner never stop blabbering so we generally cut down the sound, but we do miss the sounds of the rackets and balls hitting the court.

Yuk, I wonder if others feel the same way. Let's say goodbye to John, his days in tennis are over and we are tired of listening to his war stories.

 [Favorite](#)  [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 09:36 AM on 09/01/2007

 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Unfortunately for you, most people consider John McEnroe a terrific commentator. You're stuck with him for years to come. (Remember Bud Collins and the silly nicknames he gave to players? That drove me bonkers too.) The ideal way to watch tennis is Wimbledon via the BBC -- they don't have commercials and the commentators usually remain silent during the actual points. Heaven. Personally, by law I think Mary Carillo should man the booth for every Slam.

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breakfast [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of breakfast](#) [permalink](#)

I used to play a lot of tennis and watch as much as I could on the tube. Then came Macenroe and I just could not stomach it any more. After a while I tried watching again, but listening to the girls grunt for an hour or two is not for me.

I took the tennis gear out of my trunk and now carry my golf stuff everywhere.

Tennis is a great game and I still play some, but watching on the tube is just an irritation.

[Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) [Posted 08:43 AM on 09/01/2007](#)

Michael Giltz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Most people would say McEnroe (and Jimmy Connors et al) was the reason tennis became so broadly popular and lost it's country club aura and that the game today needs more fiery personalities. But I know what you mean. And yes, the grunting was out of hand for a while.

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Chris1 [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Chris1](#) [permalink](#)

No on moving the Australian Open to October. It's the only sporting event worth watching in January (unless you're into stupid bowls) and it's the only major tennis event available in California (an international tennis center) in prime time any time of the year.

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Wel, it would still be available in primetime whatever month it's played. But moving the Aussie Open away from January is step number one. The heat is absurd and the length of the season is ridiculous. I hate bowl games too. Maybe we could take January to head out to the courts ourselves?

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