

Waking up to women's tennis



william FOLKS
Common Folklore

Shame on me.

After an entire evening spent complaining, whining at sea-gull pitch into my girlfriend's ear, I didn't get what I eventually got.

Now I'll admit it, I had been antagonistic all week, knowing that the day after the USC-Kentucky basketball game my otherwise free Sunday afternoon was going to be spent covering (drumroll please), of all things ...

women's tennis.

Let's just say that I was not a happy camper. Not in the least. I even launched into an emotional (but in large part logically-bankrupt) rant about the apathy and pointlessness of women's athletics that earned me a profanity-laced reprimand and a one-way ticket to the couch.

Well, shame on me.

Shame on me because what transpired at Maxcy-Gregg Park Sunday afternoon was probably one of the most exciting collegiate athletic events I've ever seen, ever.

A crowd of maybe a hundred in the stands, plus twenty or thirty players and coaches watching from the inside fences, were treated to a Top 20 grudge-match and a sensational finale that was every bit as competitive, every bit as electric, and every bit as emotionally-charged as any USC football or men's basketball game I've ever seen. And I've lived in this town since the George Rodgers/Gerald Peacock era.

Looking for authentic, non-egotized, non-commercialized drama in your sports fare? South Carolina's women's tennis team is turning it out in volumes.

Trailing by a 4-2 margin to tie the No. 20 Arkansas Lady razorbacks after six singles matches, No. 19 Carolina entered doubles competition needing to capture all three Pro-set matches to pull out the win.

At first, it looked like the Lady Gamecocks were just going call this one in, as two of USC's three doubles pairings fell behind early. Junior Celine Regnier and freshman Leigh Eichelberger looked lifeless at first, the former exhausted from just winning her ninth-consecutive singles match, and the latter frustrated with a slew of unforced errors that had been her demise all afternoon.

USC's No. 1 doubles team was also in deep trouble early on, as seniors Tobi Rakic and Karolina Bulat likewise found themselves trailing 5-3 to the Lady Hogs.

Seemingly running on fumes, Bulat was playing in just her third match since suffering a severe bout with tendonitis, and Rakic had just lost her ninth singles match of the year earlier in the afternoon.

Yet all of a sudden, starting on the farthest court, USC's No. 3 doubles team (sophomore Valentine Vernaz and freshman Mandy Carvalho) began to turn the tide.

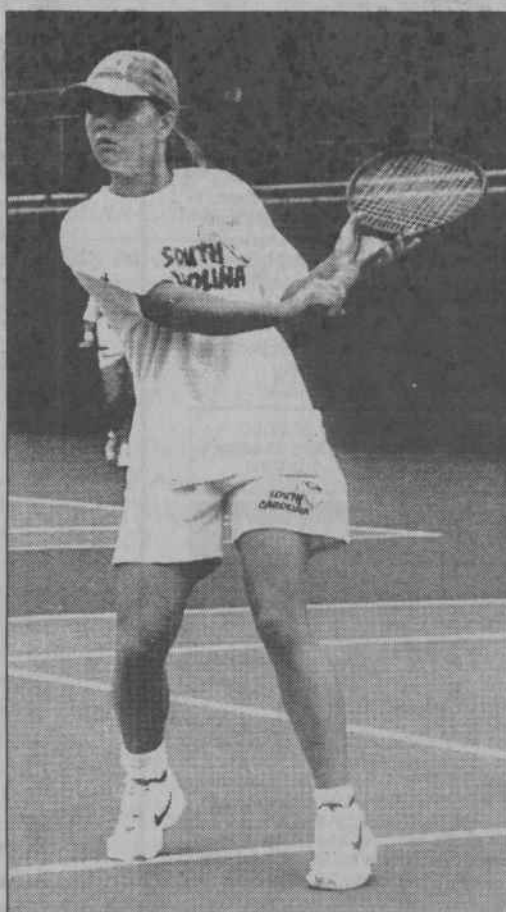
First, Vernaz hit a scorching baseline backhand that landed only inches inside the "in" line. It literally froze Arkansas' Kendra Howard and Adriana Garcia.

Then Carvalho won the game with a full-tilt, over-the-head forehand slam that rocketed past the two Lady Razorbacks like a Brett Hull slapshot.

Then, Regnier and Eichelberger started warming things up, perhaps realizing that their five-match winning streak as partners was on the line. Trailing by a 5-3 margin, Eichelberger hit what was without question the best shot of the afternoon, a no-look, over-the-shoulder backhand while off-balance and heading into the fence.

It was one of those shots that doesn't drop. But when it did, the two seized momentum and never looked back, winning 8-6.

Carolina's furious rally was only thwarted at the very last moment, as Bulat and Rakic fought tiebreak after tiebreak before eventually falling 9-8 to the Lady Razorbacks' No. 1 team of Brandi Brown and Louise Ostling.



FILE PHOTO The Gamecock

Karolina Bulat and the rest of the Lady Gamecock tennis team are ranked No. 19 in the nation.

While the defeat was indeed disheartening, the incredible comeback effort should serve as an example to all the university athletic programs: Arlo Elkins' girls don't quit.

Women's tennis may not be the hottest ticket in town, but if it can convince my paranoid-skeptical mind, it may be worth a shot. Try it out for yourself.

The Lady Gamecocks host nationally-ranked Vanderbilt at 2 p.m. today at Maxcy-Gregg Tennis Center. Admission is free, but then again so is that trip to the couch.

Mckie, Watson honored

staff writer JOE QUINN

USC backcourt teammates Bj Mckie and Melvin Watson have been named to the National Association of Basketball Coaches/General Motors Division I All-District 5 team.

The duo, along with 148 other district selections, are now eligible for the NABC All-America ballot.

Joining Mckie and Watson on the first team are Vince Carter and Antawn Jamison of North Carolina and Matt Harpring of Georgia Tech.

Greg Buckner of Clemson was named to the second team.

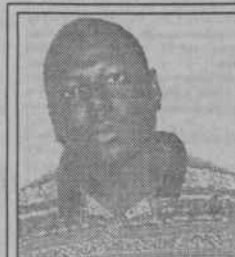
Grant on All-Freshman team

Redshirt-freshman Antonio Grant has been named to the SEC All-Freshman team, announced Monday by the conference office.

Grant becomes the third USC player in four years to make the All-Freshman squad, as Mckie (1996) and Watson (1995) previously made the first-year team.

Grant is joined on the team by Georgia's Jumaine Jones, Auburn's Scott Pohlman, Tennessee's Isaiah Victor and Tony Harris, Brent Wright of Florida and Greg LaPointe of Vanderbilt.

Blasting the committee



shawn SINGLETON
Singleton 3:16

Today is a sad day for the writer of this column and a good day for all the bible-thumping temperance groups. Due to some minor health problems

(not alcohol-related), the liquor store is permanently closed.

Now that I've cleared that up, it's now time for this week's latest diatribe for those who actually give a damn. This is the time of year that most guys who love sports live for. For me, this is so important that I have to stop watching my copies of *Cool Runnings* and *Braveheart*.

March Madness is upon us. For those who are too busy watching the luge, this is college basketball. Nothing raises my adrenaline like watching thugs and people who are otherwise total rocks compete for the grand prize—a national championship.

However, who gets to show off their moves in the Big Dance? Only the tournament selection committee can decide that, and over the years, their choices have not been the best ones.

Since the tournament field was expanded to 64 teams, the ACC has not put in fewer than four. If you listen to that tool named Vitale, five should get in. However, only three of them have winning conference records.

What about teams that could get screwed out of a bid if Clemson and Wake Forest are taken? The WAC conference has five teams with 20 or more wins and winning conference records but only three will probably be taken. How about Washington, who ended their season with a win over UCLA? The Pac-10 doesn't have a post-season tournament, so they have to wait until Sunday.

It is time for the Selection Committee to stop catering to the ACC and start recognizing teams like Washington, Seton Hall, and Colorado State.

This will save them the embarrassment of taking five to seven teams from one conference, only to see four of them bow out in the first round.

NCAA Basketball Tournament Tickets

The University of South Carolina will be allocated a limited number of tickets for the NCAA tournament games in which the Gamecocks participate. A percentage of those tickets are available for purchase by students.

Sign-up for first round tickets in the Office of Student Life, West Wing of the Russell House on March 5 or 6 between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. A drawing will be held Monday morning, March 9, to assign tickets. You must bring your current Student I.D. and a valid credit card number with expiration date for your ticket application. Ticket cost for first round play will be determined by site assignment. (Tickets will cost between \$50 - 75 per round). Student tickets will be picked up at the tournament site. (To be determined Sunday evening by the NCAA Selection Committee). The student purchasing the ticket must pick up the ticket by producing their student identification card and have their signature matched with the ticket application.

Go Gamecocks!!

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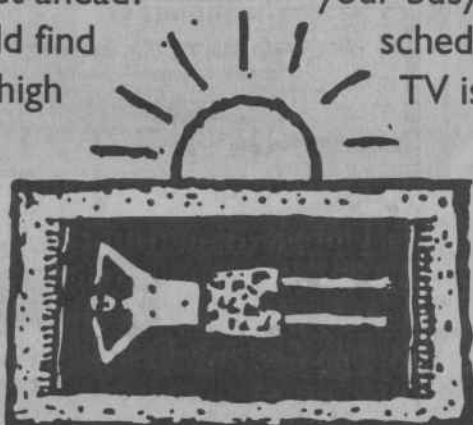
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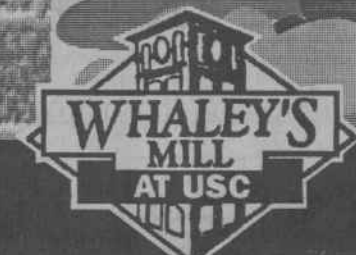
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