



John McEnroe kicks his racquet after arguing with the umpire during a match at Wimbledon in 1981.

## In the line of fire

They travel to exotic locations, rub shoulders with the tennis elite and have the best seat in the house, but is it all fun and games for an umpire? Here, one anonymous official serves up the inside story

AS TOLD TO GILLIAN NALLETAMBY

**S**tanding on the empty court with my fellow officials, I wait for the players. Today, I'm umpiring a match between a seeded US player and a low-ranked Russian; I always look forward to the David and Goliath matches and a possible upset.

As the crowd streams in, I check the ball boys and girls are ready, inspect the nets, test the scoreboards and make sure the players have chairs, towels and drinks. The American is late, so I make small talk with the Russian and recommend a restaurant for later.

The US player arrives and, purely by coincidence I'm sure, two models are escorted to the players' box. He looks tired as he sits on his chair and ties his long hair in a ponytail. Then he takes a sip of his drink, re-ties his shoelaces and saunters over with a grin.

It's time for the coin toss, but I realise I used my loose change in the vending machine earlier. Twenty-cent pieces used to be my coin of choice, but after one rolled across the court and I couldn't find it, I switched to 50-cent pieces. I finally find one in my pocket and randomly pick a player to call heads or tails. The Russian wins and chooses to serve.

The match starts slowly but, as the temperature rises and the crowd becomes restless, I have to quieten a heckler for a third time. Moments later, a mobile phone goes off, playing *The Benny Hill Show* theme and unsettling the spectators again. Crowd control is an important part of umpiring, so I smother a laugh as the US player flashes me a dirty look. You develop a good poker face and a thick skin in tennis.

When I started umpiring, I'd lie awake wondering if I'd made a bad call. Now, eight years on, it's second nature. While keeping an eye on the ball, I can think about what to have for dinner or wonder if people have noticed the sweat stains on my shirt.

Tennis is a volatile sport. As well as players, I've had coaches, girlfriends and, worst of all, mothers scream at me. The American is muttering expletives as he becomes frustrated – that's what happens when you don't get enough sleep before a match. I talk to him when the players change ends in what we call '60-second diplomacy'. The player claims he didn't swear, insisting he actually said "holy sheet". I've heard that excuse before, so I let him know he'll receive an official warning if the behaviour continues.

Matches tend to last two to three hours, but can stretch to five. When they start late, it's not unusual to be umpiring past midnight. That's a long time to be sitting up there, legs crossed, wishing you hadn't drunk so much water at lunchtime.

I look enviously at the players in their singlets, tug at my collared shirt and check the ball boys and girls are coping in the heat. It's the final set and the US player requests another toilet break. Competitors sometimes try to interrupt the game's rhythm with delay tactics such as this, or by re-tying their shoelaces or changing racquets. It's the equivalent of diving in soccer, and hard to police.

After a long rally, the line umpire calls the ball out. It's break point and the US player questions the decision. A chair umpire can overrule the line umpire's call, but I agree. The introduction of Hawk-Eye means players can challenge a line call, which I support, but on smaller outside courts like this, I have final say.

The player argues vehemently. I'm unmoved and tell him it was out. He breaks his racquet in disgust and I penalise him after his earlier warning. The stadium erupts and I catch a glimpse of the models screaming at me. I resist the temptation to wave. A player is first given a warning, then a penalty, and can then be penalised a game. Worst case, they can be defaulted from a match with suspension and a fine. It's my job to defuse the situation before this occurs.

The American was favourite, but the underdog is now serving for the match. Everyone holds their breath as the Russian plays a perfect drop volley and wins, falling to his knees in amazement. There are more theatrics on a tennis court than on Broadway.

After shaking my hand, the players exit, leaving me to submit the official scorecard to the tournament desk and write a report on any code violations. I count myself lucky I've never felt physically threatened by a player. Mostly the tantrums are for the crowd and I'm more in danger of being hit by a stray ball than a fist. Still, you never know – players can hold grudges. As I'm about to leave, someone taps me on the shoulder. I freeze. But it's only one of the line umpires; I laugh at myself and head home. **SM**

### TOP 5 TENNIS TANTRUMS

- 2008 Miami Masters: Mikhail Youzhny vs Nicolas Almagro** After missing a shot, Youzhny started hitting his head with his racquet, making it bleed. Play was stopped as officials attended to his injuries.
- 1999 French Open: Martina Hingis vs Steffi Graf** Hingis received a warning for smashing her racquet and a penalty for crossing the netline to argue a call. She left the court and her unsporting behaviour earned her a US \$1500 fine.
- 1995 Wimbledon: Jeff Tarango vs Alexander Mronz** The crowd booed Tarango as he argued a serve. When he told them to shut up, umpire Bruno Rebeuh issued a violation. Tarango stormed off, defaulting. His wife later slapped Rebeuh, twice.
- 1990 Australian Open: John McEnroe vs Mikael Pernfors** Where to start? McEnroe received a warning for intimidating a linesperson, a penalty for smashing his racquet, then was defaulted after swearing at tournament supervisor Ken Farrar.
- 1951 US Nationals: Earl Cochell vs Gardnar Mulloy** Cochell is the only player ever barred for life by the United States Tennis Association. Angry over a line call, he tried to climb the umpire's ladder to address the crowd using the microphone.

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