

Respecting the Davis Cup

A thrilling tennis event that runs under the radar deserves more attention from U.S. sports fans



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Whereas golf's Ryder Cup is a much anticipated event on the sporting calendar every two years, its tennis cousin, the Davis Cup, exists somewhat incognito in the United States. Part of the reason may be that the annual competition takes nine months to complete rather than a single weekend, challenging the

already challenged attention span of us Americans. Sixteen nations in the "World Group" play a knockout competition, with the round of 16 in March, the quarterfinals the week after Wimbledon in July, the semifinals the week after the U.S. Open in September, and the final in early December. But the location of each "tie" (the Davis Cup word for head-to-head competition that consists of two singles "rubbers" on Friday, doubles on Saturday and two more singles rubbers on Sunday) is not known until a few months before the match, unlike the Ryder Cup, which is determined years in advance. The choice of venue (and playing surface) goes, generally, to the nation that did not host the last head-to-head match between the two countries.

Add to this little-understood format the fact that many top players make themselves unavailable for Davis Cup play, which may be partially understandable since the quarterfinals and semifinals take place so close to the two leading tennis majors, and you can see why the event may not be embraced by general sports fans. The present U.S. team, however, of Andy Roddick, Mardy Fish and the doubles team of Bob and Mike Bryan deserves better. These guys have dedicated themselves to Davis Cup play (Roddick is second only to John McEnroe in Davis Cup singles wins by an American) and are worthy of our support. So support them I did, by attending the quarterfinal tie against Spain—winners of two of the last three Davis Cups—in Austin, Texas, (Roddick's home town) in July. And I can unequivocally state that if you ever have a chance to see a Davis Cup tie in the United States, do it—especially since ties are often played in places where there is no ATP Tour stop.

The atmosphere in the sold-out Frank Irwin Center was fantastic—as passionate and loud as anyone can remember an American Davis Cup crowd being. And that's one of the beauties of Davis Cup play: Fans get to be boisterous and partisan and step out of the staid behavior that characterizes many a tennis competition. The introductions at the begin-

ning of each of the three days of competition are NBA-style, an analogy that Jim Courier, the new U.S. Davis Cup captain, furthered a bit by skirting with tradition and wearing a suit rather than a team uniform. During changeovers there were various forms of entertainment, including a band. So what does a partisan band play at a tennis match? Well, while the Bryans were up 5-4, about to serve for the third set in the doubles match, the band broke into "25 or 6 to 4" by Chicago. Nice touch.

Fish played two grueling, pressure-packed singles matches, losing 8-6 in the fifth set to Feliciano Lopez on Friday, and in a four-hour, four-set thriller on Sunday to Spain's David Ferrer, who, after his performance in Austin, himself should also be elevated on tennis' pedestal. But the must-see guys are the Bryan twins, who kept the U.S. alive on Saturday by winning their 18th Davis Cup doubles match (against only two losses). These guys and the Davis Cup are a perfect

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match. After the U.S. lost both singles rubbers on Friday—Roddick losing to Ferrer—the Bryans turned the whole mood of the weekend around. Their enthusiasm is infectious. Constantly moving, bouncing, bobbing and weaving, they pulled off one of their great brotherly chest

bumps after one of the greatest doubles points you will ever see, in the fourth set. These guys have an Olympic medal (2008), a Davis Cup championship (2007) and 11 grand slam doubles titles, yet shockingly they may rank below the Winklevoss twins in pop-culture recognition. That's a shame. The only category where the Winklevosses are ahead of the Bryans is in lawsuits against Mark Zuckerberg.

Aside from the disappointing loss to Spain in this tie, there was little wrong with the competition or the way the U.S. team represented itself. And with Spain and Serbia each in the semifinals, there is the tantalizing possibility that this year's Davis Cup could be decided in December by a match between the top two players in the world, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal. That could indeed put the Davis Cup back on the sports radar where it rightly belongs. ■

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