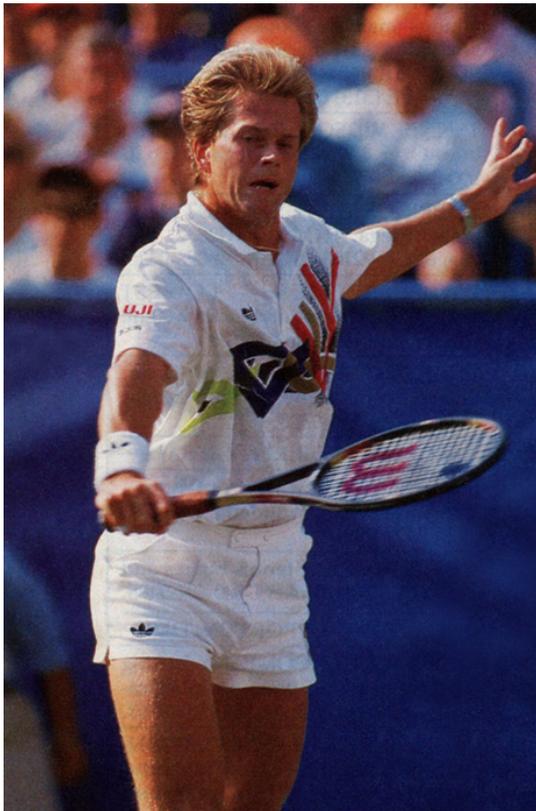


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by **Norman Zeitchick**



FLUSHING MEADOW, N.Y. In the end, it was Monica Seles' ferocious ground attack and Stefan Edberg's flawless serve and volley that prevailed. But for two weeks, it was the electricity of 39- year-old Jimmy Connors, the Lazarus of tennis, that lit up the U.S. Open and taught us what the sport is all about. Both first-time winners Seles and Edberg also vaulted back into the No. 1 spots on their respective tours.

Seles reigned atop the rankings most of the year, but in late summer she and Steffi Graf seesawed at that position, as Edberg and Boris Becker had done throughout the year. Seles

survived a three-set slugfest in the semifinals with the player in the women's draw, 15-year-old Jennifer Capriati, then in the final dismantles the relentless attack of the oldest player, Martina Navratilova, 7-6, 6-1. Her first U.S. Open crown gave Seles three of this year's four Grand Slam titles. She withdrew from Wimbledon amid a storm of controversy.

"It feels great," said a bubbly Seles afterward. "Probably the happiest whenever I won a Grand Slam."

Edberg beat another first time finalist, Jim Courier, 6-2, 6-4, 6-0. Courier hadn't dropped a set and had derailed the Connors express in the semifinals before going into the high-bounding serves and surgical volleys of the Swede. "This is probably the best match I ever played," Edberg fairly gushed after his triumph. "I'm even beginning to like New York, too."

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One player who definitely loves New York is Connors, who defied age (39), ranking (No. 174) and seeding (he received a wild card into the draw) to give the performance of a lifetime. It almost didn't happen. Playing a first-round night match against Patrick McEnroe, Connors was down two sets and 0-3 in the third. It was past midnight, and most of the faithful had gone home or turned off their TV sets.

But the competitive spark that has smoldered in the five-time Open champion for 20 years erupted that night into a supernova that kept the entire tournament slarst ruck. It's not just his age, though it's remarkable that he still can play at such a high level. It's not just his will to win, though nobody has ever come back from the brink as often or as dramatically as he has. It's that Connors puts everything - body and soul - into his game, with a joyous competitive zeal that's contagious.

"Every time I play now, it's a final," mused Connors. "I never, ever thought I'd play tennis again [after surgery for a wrist injury]. And because of that, my enthusiasm and my intensity and my enjoyment of the game is all lifted to somewhere else. To have those cheers ringing down like that, that is what you break your back for every time you walk out there."

In doing so, he intimately involves every member of the audience in his struggle. They feel the exhilaration of the attack, the thrill of the putaway or impossible get. And the energy of the crowd pumps Cannors to play beyond what he alone could accomplish.

The synergy between audience and performance elevates a Connors match beyond sport; it's a symphony in short pants, an epiphany of sweat. Pat Mac heard the music firsthand that night. As Connors clawed and scratched back into the match, the vocal few that remained in the stadium carried Jimbo to a five-set triumph that ended at 1:35 in the morning. "There's a pattern that has been set throughout my career you're going to have to kill me to beat me," Connors said afterward.

"I'm going to do what it takes to win until the last minute. It's what I do best." Just ask Michiel Schapers and 10th-seeded Karel Novacek, who succumbed in straight sets as Connors stormed into the round of 16. There, before an overflow crowd on his birthday, Connors played the match of the tournament against Aaron Krickstein, who had knocked out eighth seeded Andre Agassi in the first round. (Not surprisingly, nobody missed tennis' poster boy, unless you count Nike, which had no one to preen in the new outfits it had created for him.)

Connors was down one set and 1-5 in the second, when for old time's sake an airplane roared over the stadium. Rumor had it that New York City Mayor David Dinkins, present in a ringside seat, had ordered the distraction to help out his old buddy. Connors obligingly roared back to win the set in a tie-break, incited by the crowd and a volatile overrule protest.

Nursing a sore knee, he fell behind in the third set, won the fourth, only to find himself on the brink of extinction, down 2-5 in the fifth. Krickstein is a marathoner who'd never lost a five-setter at the Open, but he never faced such a relentless charge, as Connors stared down defeat. Twenty thousand people held their breath as Jimbo attacked the net at every opportunity, forced a fifth-set tie-break, then willed himself to victory.

"I don't mind opening up my chest and showing my heart," said Connors. "That's what tennis is all about." Heart was definitely the issue for defending champion Pete Sampras, who seemed almost relieved after being blown out by an impressive Courier in the quarters. "It is tough to come to a match being the defending champion," he said in defeat. "It is kind of like the monkey is off my back."

That kind of talk astounds an old battle-ax like Connors. "I spent my whole life trying to win seven of these," he reflected. "That is the greatest feeling you could have, to be the U.S. Open champion. If these guys aren't living for that, then some thing is wrong."

To emphasize his point, Connors reached inside himself again in the quarters to beat Paul Haarhuis, who had knocked a wounded Becker out of the tournament in the third round. Overcoming a sluggish start, Connors turned the match around on a single point that defied belief. Scrambling to return four overheads in succession, Connors finally won the point with a running backhand down the line to break both Haarhuis' serve and spirit. It was the crowning jewel in a sparkling performance.

As Connors thrived, others struggled to survive the 90-degree temperatures, the distractions and the heated competition that makes the Open such a pressure-cooker. Ivan Lendl saved two match points in his opening round match against Richard Krajicek before the Dutchman wilted in the heat and Lendl escaped in five.

Lendl again needed five sets (and two days) to down the hot-and-cold Wimbledon champion, Michael Stich. Edberg's game kicked into gear against Michael Chang, who had defeated John McEnroe in a thrilling third-round five-setter. The Swede raised it yet another level to render Lendl helpless in the semifinals. Connors' influence reached even into the women's draw, which lay dormant until the quarterfinals. "He's an inspiration," said the sixth-seeded, 34-year-old Navratilova. "If he can do it at that age, so can I. I'm a spring chicken compared to him."

Finally finding her serve again, Navratilova attacked with reckless abandon, winning consecutive three-set, two-tie-break thrillers over Arantxa Sanchez Vicario and No. 1 Steffi Graf to get to the final. Capriati, staying up past her bedtime, ousted defending champ Gabriela Sabatini in a dramatic nighttime quarterfinal.

Then she came within a third-set tie-break of becoming the youngest-ever Open finalist, giving Seles all she could handle and more, but finally failing to hold serve twice with the match on her racquet. So the Open has two new champions, but the buzz from the oldest is ringing still. Tellingly, during one press conference, "I-am-no-longer-the-reigning-Open-champion" Sampras complained, "Is this about Connors or about me?" Silly question, Pete.