



## Behind the Scenes at the Sony Ericsson Open

**B**y now you know that Andy Roddick beat Tomas Berdych and Kim Clijsters beat Venus Williams at this year's Sony Ericsson Open in Key Biscayne, but you don't know—as Paul Harvey used to say—"The rest of the story."

I've covered sports for years, and regardless of the event, people always want to know more about what goes on 'behind the scenes' than what happened on the court, field or diamond itself.

Here are some of my observations from South Florida's premier tennis event:

- I first covered the Key Biscayne tournament in 1993 when it was called the "Lipton." That was a tasteful title. The "Nasdaq," and now the "Sony Ericsson," don't have the same euphonic ring to it.

- The strokes have changed over the years. Stepping into the ball and following through over the shoulder went out with the rotary dial phone. Players today get much more power with the open stance forehand and swinging their back hip around. Their follow-through is now a 'flippy-thing' over the bicep vs. the old fashioned 'horse-shoe toss' follow through the rest of us learned pre-1980.

- What happened to men's fashions? Collared shirts have been pushed aside for glorified T-shirts with colors and patterns that would make George Jetson proud. Shorts are looking more like Capri pants.

- The handshakes have changed with the strokes and the fashions: A 'soul-shake' with a mini-hug or a fist bump are now the way to go. If you resort to a standard handshake, you're showing your age.

- I prefer watching women's tennis more than men's. The points are usually longer and easier to follow. Sometimes the men's matches are just a battle of strong serves—followed by a great return or a shank, either way ending the point.

- While thousands of fans wait in line for expensive food, or to get into a match, or even the restroom, there is a parallel universe going on just feet away. Just behind the door, players are lounging on couches, peddling stationary bikes, walking on treadmills and acting like normal people. There are large signs in the restricted areas that say, "No photographs, recordings or autographs—or credentials will be revoked." I saw and heard some fascinating things, but I'd like to return next year, so I can't tell you.

- The media underworld isn't too shabby either. We have luxury boxes from which to choose, buffet meals and lounge areas. They give us \$10.00 of phony money for meals,

and if we spend more than that, it comes out of our pocket.

- The main interview room you see on TV sits empty 99% of the time, except for a couple of bored stenographers waiting for the next athlete to explain—often in broken English—why they won or lost. A reporter was joking about James Blake losing in an early round, and Blake walked in seconds later. That could have been awkward.

- One of the players had to go to the bathroom before her third set, and a line-judge escorted her through the crowd toward a standard-issued port-a-potty. Luckily, there was no line at that moment. Talk about awkward!

- Fans are somehow getting word of when the big names are coming out to practice, and they wait patiently as if the President was about to arrive. The practice courts are a very public venue for the players, therefore, it can be daunting for the players to get there. Invariably, most of the fans are going to walk away without the autograph or picture they're shouting for. (The US Open, by contrast, has practice courts just off the locker rooms. The players can get out there without having to fear a mob scene.)

- I saw Roger Federer walking with his coach to a practice court. The first few feet were relatively normal, and then it was like watching a snowball become an avalanche. By the time they reached their destination, their conversation was no longer possible and body guards were shouting at fans, "Let him get to work!"

- Conversely, I saw former pro Justin Gimelstob walking through the crowd unrecognized. I first covered him at the Orange Bowl in the early 1990's when he won the 16-and-under singles title over another former pro that never became a household name, Cecil Mammit. Knowing the arc of their careers—from best teenage players in the world—to retirees—made me realize how long I've been around this game.

That's okay. The clothes and the strokes may be different, but that complimentary buffet still tastes as good as ever.

**Champion Andy Roddick photo by Carmen**



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