

Epic tennis match brought to life

Reviewed by Chris Carlson
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The best sports stories are not about box scores, but about the human spirit.

Tennis, a sport that's entirely about the individual, is awash in universal themes. In "A Terrible Splendor," author Marshall Jon Fisher taps into a geyser of them.

In providing a historical account of the 1937 five-set tennis match between American Don Budge and German Baron Gottfried von Cramm, Fisher hits on a nonfiction storyline that would make a screenwriter squeal.

The match, played during the Davis Cup and on the cusp of World War II, pitted America against Germany. More than that, though, it pitted a homely American, brought up on public courts and obsessed with jazz records, against a handsome, aristocratic German.

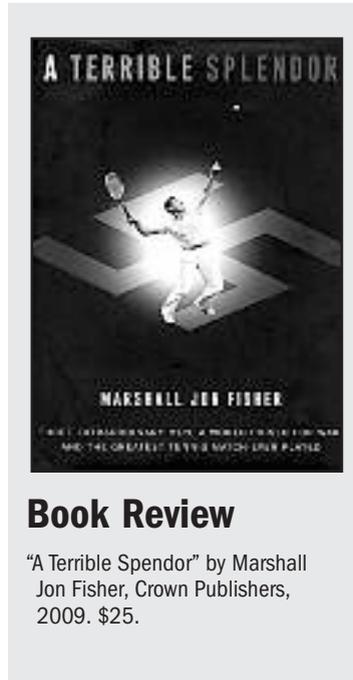
The German was a poor representative of the Nazi regime, however. Along with his aristocratic nature, which the Nazis abhorred, von Cramm was homosexual, which the Nazis liked less.

He was sympathetic to those being sent to concentration camps in Germany, an opponent of the Hitler regime, a man who prized sportsmanship over all else and who was under the watchful eye of Nazi leaders.

While Budge's workmanlike and humble rise to become the world's best player (not unlike the Williams sisters today) is plenty compelling, von Cramm's personality takes over the book.

His perennial runner-up status, and the grace with which he handles it, make him the protagonist, even if his foil doesn't lie across the court, but in the form of the unseen shadow pulling the strings of war in Germany.

The ability of von Cramm to shrug off the turmoil of his per-



Book Review

"A Terrible Splendor" by Marshall Jon Fisher, Crown Publishers, 2009. \$25.

sonal life, and perform so heroically against Budge, is a testament to his spirit and will have even American readers pulling hard for the German.

Fisher, who lives in The Berkshires and whose magazine articles have been published in *The Atlantic* and *Harper's*, is at his best making the grounds of Wimbledon come to life in this book.

Fisher's first solo effort — he's written books with his father, David E. Fisher — was published by Crown Publishing.

Throughout the book, the reader is transported back to when The Championships were played in pants, and the true testament of a man's greatness was how he carried himself on the court.

Bad calls were answered by intentional errors to even the score, and tea was served on the sidelines between sets.

The most popular sports stories appeal to a universal audience,

but here Fisher misses his mark, spending too much time buried in tennis play-by-play and losing the casual reader.

Like the intentional missed shots of Bill Tilden that he describes in his book, however, Fisher appears to know exactly what he is doing.

In his acknowledgments, he details his three ideal readers, all rabid tennis fans. And unlike movies, which can fast-forward through the tennis scenes and to the human drama, a writer's need is to provide a detailed account, a reality that's likely to turn off a nonsports crowd.

Among tennis fans, however casual, Fisher has certainly hit a winner.

While expertly weaving world history, the varied backgrounds of each of the men involved in the Davis Cup, and the details of what he considers "the greatest match ever played," he keeps the story moving and the pages turning.

Those who enjoy tennis play-by-play will find the accounts riveting, and Fisher breaks them up with colorful anecdotes and historical accounts, allowing the book to read more like a novel than a book of fiction.

Fisher aids that process by putting imagined dialogues into the mouths of his characters at various points — always a risky

proposition — but he is always conscious to note when he's doing so, and he seems to possess such a grasp of each man's personality that the reader inherently trusts him to do so.

A young tennis fan myself, I was ignorant of this match until reading the book, which only enhanced my enjoyment of it.

Because I witnessed it, I fall into the camp that considers the four-hour, 48-minute Wimbledon final of 2008 between Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer to be the finest match ever played. Reading this book brought back such feelings that I re-watched it, played nearly 71 years later on the same hallowed courts that Fisher bring to such vibrant life.

It too was filled with human drama, as emotional an ending as I have witnessed. The torch was passed that day, during a competition between close friends, from Federer, considered a threat to be named the best ever, to Nadal, who, barring injury, will someday climb that podium.

As I watched that epic again, the thought I found flitting in my head was that I hope to someday read a writer's account of that 2008 match that rivals what Fisher has done with Budge and von Cramm.

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