

Subscribe now for unlimited access to FT.com ▶

We live in FINANCIAL TIMES®

FT.com
FINANCIAL TIMES

[FT Home](#) > [Weekend](#) > [Books](#) > [Non-Fiction](#)

A Terrible Splendor

Review by Peter Aspden

Published: March 16 2009 05:33 | Last updated: March 16 2009 05:33

A Terrible Splendor: Three Extraordinary Men, a World Poised for War, and the Greatest Tennis Match Ever Played

By Marshall Jon Fisher

Crown \$24.95, 312 pages

Some weeks ago, before I started reading this book, I was coincidentally given a copy of *The Art of Lawn Tennis*, Bill Tilden's classic tennis manual from the 1920s. I imagined what the Lycra-clad protagonists of today's hypertrophic game would make of Tilden's solemn advice: "Do not appear on the courts in dark clothes, as they are apt to be heavy and hinder your speed of movement, and they are also a violation of the unwritten ethics of the game."

Ethics, unwritten or otherwise, are at the core of *A Terrible Splendor*. Marshall Jon Fisher's vivid account of what has been described as the greatest tennis match of all time. No, not any of the recent and sublime encounters between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal but a Davis Cup match between Germany and the US that featured two giants of the game: Don Budge and Gottfried von Cramm.

The compelling nature of the match, in tennis terms alone, would be enough to make this a gripping read. Budge was a brash, freckled Californian whose bludgeoning backhand, according to an opponent with an apparent penchant for surrealism, made you feel like "you were volleying a piano". Cramm was an aristocrat and a gentleman, who learnt to play on a clay court overlooking his family's castle and who allied a calm, refined game with an instinctive grace that made him a favourite all over the world, not least that parlour of good manners and wholesome competition, Wimbledon.

But tennis is almost the least interesting element of Fisher's account. For the historic match between the two players took place in London, with the world poised for brutal war and the players bringing all manner of psychological baggage on court with them. Completing the triangle at the heart of the book is Tilden himself, the former champion from the US who was beginning to find himself ostracised from his own nation's tennis establishment for his homosexuality, and was acting as a coach for the German team, against his fellow Americans.

Fisher skilfully interweaves the stories of the three men with the political events of the time to produce a snapshot of a society riven with judgmentalism and hypocrisy; wearing dark clothes on court was the least of it.

The most poignant story is that of Cramm, another closet homosexual, whose resistance to the Nazi regime ensured that, during that long summer afternoon in front of Queen Mary and a packed centre court, he was, in his own words, "playing for my life".

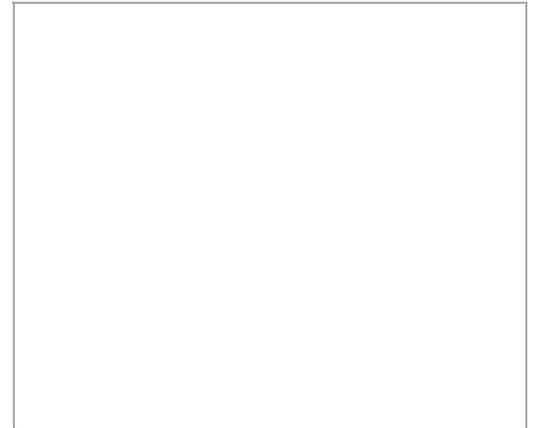
Fisher's model for the book, which he acknowledges in an opening homage, is John McPhee's *Levens of the Game*. This used a semi-final in the US Open between Clark Graebner and Arthur Ashe as a forensic examination of American values in the late 1960s. Fisher similarly juggles the terrible countdown to war with a lively and scrupulous report of the match that was to have such an effect on the three men.

He can convincingly claim that if the result had been different – it's best to read this book without knowing it – the lives of all three of them might have taken a dramatically divergent direction. Fisher's coda, showing how those lives unfurled after the match was completed, provides the most moving moments of his account. He shows how sport can stand both outside the "real world", and yet remain subject to its darker whims. The matches of today between Federer and Nadal are easily equal in sporting intensity to that titanic struggle between Budge and Cramm. But the stakes, thankfully, have faded to relative insignificance.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2009

[Print article](#) [Email article](#) [Order reprints](#)

[Digg](#) [reddit](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Facebook](#) [Delicious](#)
[Mixx](#) [Propeller](#) [Yahoo! Buzz](#) [stumbleupon](#)



[Jobs](#) [Business for sale](#) [Contracts & tenders](#)

SEARCH

Finance Manager (ACA, ACCA, CIMA, CPA)

British Gas Business

Senior Manager Customer Franchise

Barclaycard

Finance Controller

Coffee Nation

Capital & Procurement Accountant

Listed Retail Organisation

RECRUITERS

FT.com can deliver talented individuals across all industries around the world

[Post a job now](#)

RELATED SERVICES

FT Bespoke Forums	FT Newspaper subscriptions
Annual reports	FT Fine Wine Plan
Market research	FT Diaries
Growth companies	FT Bookshop
Corporate subscriptions	FT Conferences
Luxury Travel brochures	FT Syndication services
Analyst Research	The Non-Executive Director
MBA-Direct.com	