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# A terrible splendor

By Jeff Warren

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Now that the Oscars are over it's time to think about who will win in 2012. (It isn't, but having just finished Marshall Fisher's book about the epic tennis match between Oakland's Don Budge and Germany's Baron Gottfried von Cramm one can predict a future nominee.

A Terrible Splendor, indeed. When made into the inevitable period piece this book could sweep the Academy Awards. (Too bad Redford's not 26). Forget McEnroe/Borg in '80 or even last year's titanic Wimbledon final between Federer and Roddick. The greatest match ever played took place amidst the build-up to World War II back in '37. It was the deciding Davis Cup match between the U.S. and Germany and was played before a packed house (including Queen Mary) on Wimbledon's hallowed center court. Millions followed it on radio. The Whole World Was Watching.

This story is not just for tennis aficionados. It's got everything: Hollywood stars, Edward the VIII's abdication, jealousy, concentration camps, blackmail, Barbara Hutton, the world's richest woman, the retreat from Stalingrad, adultery, homosexuality, plus drugs, sex and rock and roll. OK, they called it jazz back then, but you get the point. If there's not something that titillates you, you've definitely got to get out more.

There's inside stuff: Did Hitler really call during the match? Did Budge wave to queen? Did she wave back?

We country bumpkins get an extra hit because there's always a local angle. Don Budge had been coached by Meadowood's first tennis pro, the late Tom Stow. Tom was Doug King's coach (Meadowood's current pro) and he helped coach Maggie, a 16-year-old Sacramento teen when she won the National Juniors doubles back at the Marion Cricket Club in Philly 20 years before she moved her family out to Conn Valley. But I digress.

In 1937 tennis was still an amateur sport. Actually, it was riddled with under-the-table



payments and rampant hypocrisy (somewhat like college sports today), but the pretense was there.

As big as Wimbledon, Forest Hills, and the French Open were, it was the Davis Cup — played by nations that caught the public's attention. It was one thing to choke on Center Court when playing for yourself, quite another when an entire country was counting on you.

Back then, nationalism was king. Sport reflected the times.

You have to remember the racism, the homophobia, the anti-Semitism. You had Hitler snubbing Jesse Owens in the '36 Olympics. Max Smelling inexplicably knocking out the Brown Bomber Joe Louis, in 1937, and von Cramm playing on a Davis Cup squad which had been crippled by the banishment of Daniel Prenn. His crime? Prenn was Jewish.

Cramm himself was under the watchful eye of the SS, on three counts: His wife was one-quarter Jewish. He was often seen in homosexual bars in Berlin. (Before the War Berlin was the most electric, some would say decadent, others most tolerant, city — since Caligula's Rome.) Worse, Cramm was an aristocrat, not Himmler's favorite fraternity. It didn't help that the Baron's coach, the greatest tennis player who ever lived, Bill Tilden, also had a fondness for young boys. Forget Prop 8. This was when just being thought homosexual could land you in jail, and it did, for both von Cramm and Tilden, but that's another column.

In 1935 Germany might have advanced to the Davis Cup finals, had not von Cramm walked over to the umpire and calmly informed him that the ball had grazed his racket before Lund (his partner) had hit a winner. He was the soul of chivalry.

Von Cramm was a gentleman. In '35 he was roundly criticized for having let his country and his teammates down. His riposte? "Do you think that I would sleep tonight knowing that the ball had touched my racket without my saying so? I would be violating every principle this game stands for. On the contrary, don't think I'm letting the German people down. I think I'm doing them credit."

Sounds just like Dennis Rodman or Mark McGwire doesn't it?

After serving a prison term for violating Paragraph 175 (Google it) he served as a machine gunner on the Eastern front and was one of 19 men (out of a company of 120) who survived.

In the greatest match ever, he and Budge went five sets. On the last point, oh. I won't spoil the movie. Look for it. Like von Cramm and Budge, it's gonna be a winner.

(Jeff Warren is a newcomer whose family didn't arrive here until the '50s. He is a businessman, husband and father of three. His Web site is [www.jeffwarren.com](http://www.jeffwarren.com).)

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