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Serving for Supremacy

Before World War II, democratic America battled fascist Germany on the track, in the ring—and on center court at Wimbledon

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Sporting contests quite often have been viewed as reflections of greater national rivalries. That was certainly the case between the United States and Germany in the 1930s, long before the two powers met on the field of battle. Historians usually cite two major sporting events of the pre-World War II era as symbolic clashes between democracy and fascism—with America's inherent superiority ultimately reflected in both.

The first was the stunning four gold-medal performance of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. That a black man—regarded by Adolf Hitler as innately inferior—proved to be the Olympic über-mensch was a blow to the führer's dream of the Games as a showcase for German superiority. It is frequently written that Hitler snubbed Owens by refusing to shake his hand. But Hitler, anticipating this potential dilemma, chose not to shake hands with any of the champions.

The second was the world championship bout between heavyweights Joe Louis and Max Schmeling at Yankee Stadium in June of 1938. Two years earlier, Schmeling, a former world champion, had cemented his standing as the most popular athlete in Germany by knocking out the young Louis. Since that stunning upset, the "Brown Bomber" had rebounded to become world champion. Hitler believed that another Schmeling victory would raise the banner of Aryan supremacy around the world. Louis would later say that he knew his country was depending on him, and he knocked Schmeling down three times and out in the first round.

But one year after the Berlin Olympics and one year before the Louis-Schmeling rematch, there was another epic sporting event—this one on center court at Wimbledon—that pitted the two best players in the world: a blue-collar youngster from hardscrabble Oakland, Don Budge, against the German aristocrat and Aryan ideal, Gottfried von Cramm. His full name and titular rank makes even more of an impression: Baron Gottfried Alexander Maximilian Walter Kurt Freiherr von Cramm. Budge would say afterward that von Cramm received a telephone call from Hitler just before taking the court, but von Cramm always denied it.

This historic Davis Cup tennis match has largely faded from our collective sports memory, but a new book, "A Terrible Splendor" (Crown Publishers) by Marshall Jon Fisher, should remedy that. In keeping with a modern trend in which every sports book has to be about "the greatest" game or season, Fisher has subtitled his book "The Greatest Tennis Match Ever Played."

It was indeed a great match—the American writer/cartoonist James Thurber, a tennis fan who was in attendance, would describe it as "something so close to art." Nobody was expecting that. Only a month earlier the No. 1-ranked Budge had wiped the same center court with No. 2-ranked von Cramm, defeating him 6–3, 6–4, 6–2 to win the Wimbledon championship.

Still, the rematch was eagerly anticipated because so much was riding on the outcome. Back in the '30s, the Davis Cup was one of the most coveted trophies in sport, a revered symbol of national glory. Germany, though it had repeatedly come close, had never won it and Nazi leadership wanted this propaganda victory. The contest between the U.S. and Germany had, as many anticipated, come down to the fifth and final match between the world's top two stars. (The winning team would still have to play defending champion England; however, the great English champion Fred Perry had retired since the last Davis Cup triumph, and England would not present much of a challenge.)

But there was even more at stake than almost anyone knew: von Cramm had reason to believe he might be playing for his freedom and, possibly even, his life. And it is the backstory of the

match that is even more compelling than the five-set drama that was played out on grass. Fisher's yarn is the tale of three men, the two players and the great American champion Bill Tilden.

The Associated Press voted Tilden the greatest tennis player of the first half of the 20th century; he was an American sporting giant on a par with Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey. An imperious man with royal tastes, Tilden was also a closeted homosexual with a sexual appetite for teenage boys. Long after his career was over, when he was a shell of man and in financial ruin, Tilden would go to prison twice for sexual crimes. As he had done his entire life, Tilden had defied popular opinion in America by becoming von Cramm's personal coach and, thus, was there at Wimbledon.

Still, it is von Cramm's tale that is least familiar and the most riveting. A member of a distinguished German family, von Cramm was the embodiment of sports nobility, the ultimate gentleman on the court. He too was gay, and, though he married to please his family and to protect his public image, von Cramm imbibed deeply of the libertine nightlife offered in the Berlin of the 1920s. But as Hitler rose to power in the '30s, homosexuals were increasingly deplored for their moral turpitude ("sexual Bolshevism" was a Nazi indictment). They ranked with Jews and communists as outcasts and, ultimately, as criminals—enemies of the Third Reich.

Exceptions were, of course, made and Nazi leaders protected—at least for a while—some of the nation's more notable entertainers and athletes who were homosexuals, including von Cramm. Von Cramm never made it easy. He refused to join the Nazi Party and was prone to make indiscreet public comments. He was particularly distressed that a top Jewish player, Daniel Prenn, had been forced off the Davis Cup team, convinced that the decision hurt Germany's chances to bring home the trophy. When Prenn fled Germany for England, von Cramm illegally funneled money to him there. A Davis Cup victory would make von Cramm Germany's greatest sports hero and might prolong any immunity from his sins and misdemeanors; defeat, he feared, could make him vulnerable.

Budge is the weak link in the story. The son of an Oakland truck driver and a product of public courts, he had an exceptional tennis career. His sons are quoted as saying that he was as good a father as he was a tennis player, an admirable tribute but reflecting a life that that does not necessarily make for a compelling yarn.

His tennis game, however, was riveting and, at the time of the match against von Cramm, unrivaled. Over a two-year stretch Budge would win 92 matches and 14 tournaments in a row, including the Grand Slam in 1938. With the Davis Cup at stake and von Cramm playing the match of his life, Budge rallied—from two sets down and from 1–4 in the fifth set—to win 6–8, 5–7, 6–4, 6–2, 8–6. Von Cramm, the great sportsman, congratulated Budge afterward: "Don, this was absolutely the finest match I have ever played in my life. I'm very happy I could have played it against you, whom I like so much."

Von Cramm left Wimbledon and toured the United States, Australia and Japan—playing tennis, enjoying life but too often commenting publicly and indiscreetly (he referred to Hitler as a "house painter") on the affairs of his homeland. When he finally returned to Germany nine months after the match, he was arrested for sexual deviance. The court sentenced him to a year in prison, only a mild rebuke given the regime's murderous standards. He would go on to serve in World War II, though not as an officer befitting his family pedigree, and survived the Eastern front with only severe frostbite. After the war, he resumed his tennis career and competed on the German Davis Cup team until 1953.

Von Cramm is almost unknown in the United States, and his story warrants the telling. Fisher's book provides a welcome reminder of how a great athlete, in dire circumstances, can rise to extraordinary levels—both in his game and in his life.

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