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'Terrible Splendor' serves up a winner

Reviewer **Graham Rowe**, a writer based in Chandler, Ariz.
Sunday, June 21, 2009

Weather



Charleston
Scattered Clouds, 95°

A TERRIBLE SPLENDOR. By Marshall Jon Fisher. Crown. 321 pages. \$25.

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Only a few tennis matches deserve an entire book written about them. "A Terrible Splendor," by Marshall Jon Fisher, is about the deciding match of the 1937 Davis Cup competition between the United States and Germany.

It's an engrossing account about the contest between Donald Budge and Gottfried von Cramm, the star players for America and Germany, respectively.

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But Fisher does more than describe the match, still considered one of the greatest of all time. The book juxtaposes the rise of the Nazis with that of Cramm, a German aristocrat. Cramm, whose politics (and sexual preference) made him suspect in the eyes of the Nazi regime, knew he had to keep winning to stay out of trouble with the Gestapo, which was monitoring his activities. Fisher does a compelling job of making the reader feel the pressure Cramm must have been under, knowing that a victory for Germany in the Davis Cup would buy him immunity from the Nazis.

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Budge, in contrast, was a young, gangly, jazz-loving Californian. On the court, however, he was already famous for his "cannonball serve" and his unassailable backhand. Budge's modest upbringing stands in stark contrast to Cramm's aristocratic background. Although Budge had beaten Cramm in straight sets just weeks before, it became clear from the first point that Cramm would not be so easily beaten this time.

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Fisher spends so much time on personalities and politics, there's little time for the match itself, and the reader is left wishing he had devoted a few more pages to it. Despite this flaw, "A Terrible Splendor" serves up a winner.