

Sport

Fans long for the bad boys of the good old days

By Daniel Girard

A shortage of personalities and temper tantrums among the world's top male tennis players is being blamed for a drop in attendance at this year's Wimbledon Championships. Gemini News Service reports that big serves and bigger money have seen the game lose points with fans.

Connors or McEnroe.

Others note that the equipment used today is dramatically different from that used a few years ago. Larger-headed racquets enabling players to propel the ball at lightning speeds have reduced the number of thrilling rallies in matches. The powerful serve is everybody loved to hate.

The trio, whose volatile relationship with the gentlemen's game stretched from the 1970s to the early 1990s, were often considered a disgrace for their verbal abuse of opponents, officials, spectators and anybody else who got in the new king of the court.

One of the best illustrations of that came in the 1991 Wimbledon men's final between Germans Boris Becker and Michael Stich: during the two-and-a-half-hour match the players spent just seven minutes hitting the ball.

Recognising the decline in public appeal of their game, men's tennis officials have recently made a couple of cosmetic adjustments. To speed up play, the time players are allowed between points was

But they were also players everybody loved to watch. And in these days of reduced television coverage and falling attendance at tournaments, tennis officials are wishing they could bring back the bad boys.

There are not enough charismatic figures," lamented Chris Gorringe, chief executive of the Wimbledon Championships. This year, attendance at his tournament, considered the top event in the world, was down despite consistently good weather.

While the farewell tour of Wimbledon by Martina Navratilova, the grand old lady of tennis, helped fill seats, it is men's matches that were expected to sell tickets and the image of the game. Considered by many sports fans to be devoid of personalities, the men's circuit has recently been losing its public appeal.

Wimbledon officials dream that deficiencies at the gate of this year's event could be wiped out by the baggy shorts, long hair and designer stubble of former champion and current tennis playboy Andre Agassi.

Agassi were dashed when the American was bounced from the competition in the fourth round.

The British-based Kenyan was paced in the first part of the race by Ireland's Frank O'Mara, who also assisted Kiptanui in his unsuccessful attempt on the world 5,000 metres mark at the Goodwill Games last Tuesday.

Kiptanui said afterwards: "I'm not really surprised. I had hoped for 8.08. It was fairly easy. I can definitely do better - 8.05."

He said he would now take a two-week break from competition. "First I'll rest for a week. Then I want to go below eight minutes in the 3,000 metres steeplechase race in Zurich, that's my main goal."

Russian Lyubov Gurina set the fastest time of the year in the women's 800 metres when she clocked one minute 56.60 seconds. Maria Mutola of Mozambique had set the previous best of 1:57.63 at the Goodwill Games in St Petersburg on Thursday.

By comparison, big-serving American Pete Sampras, the world's top ranked player, is frequently branded as a boring technician because of his quiet, efficient dismissal of opponents.

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