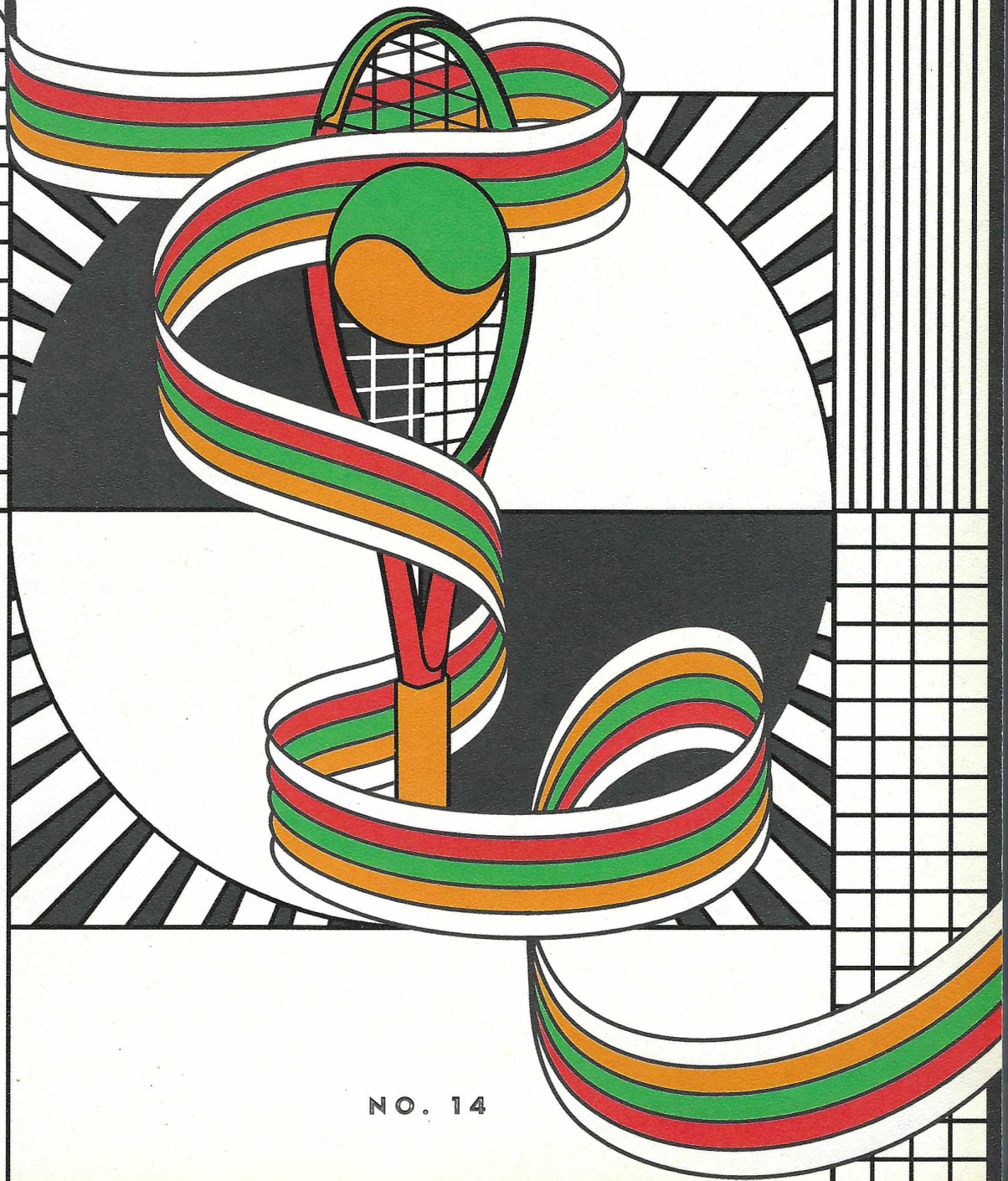


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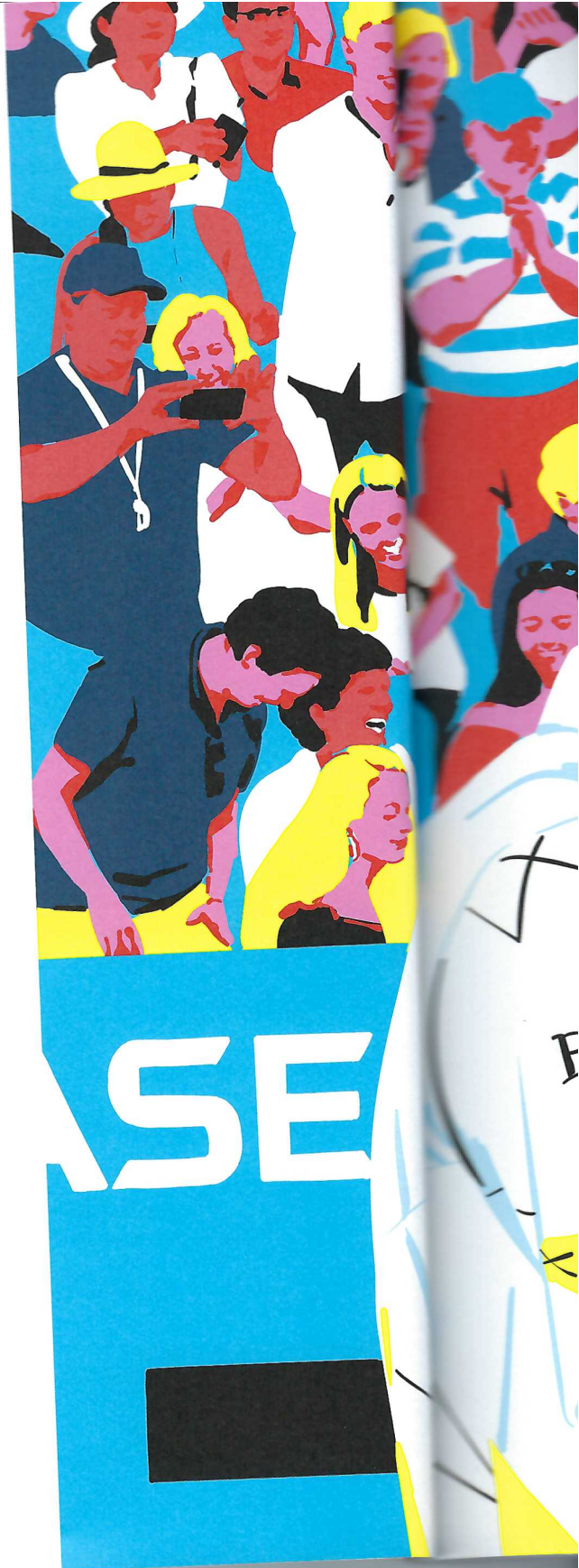
A Queens Cheer

For a Moment, as the Boos
Rained Down, New York
Still Felt Like New York.

By **Scott Korb**
Illustration by **Agnes Ricart**

For my 40th, my wife bought us two upper-level tickets to Arthur Ashe Stadium, in Queens, for the 2016 US Open men's final. That'll make me 44 this year, the year we left the city. We'd both moved to New York in 1998, and over the years we'd both traveled the same route to the same stop—Mets-Willets Point—on the Metropolitan Transit Authority's No. 7 train to see baseball countless times, and though I've always been a fan and practically lived on the high school courts in the summers growing up in the Milwaukee suburbs, this was our first trip to see professional tennis. My wife wasn't then a fan. She is now.

That night, Stan Wawrinka beat world No. 1 Novak Djokovic in four sets. My mem-

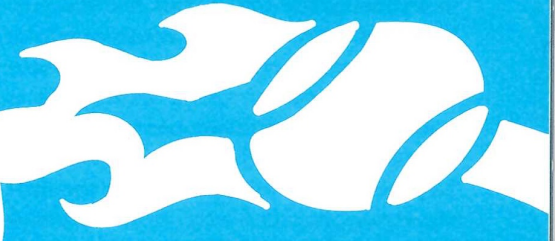




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ory of the match itself is hazy. No particular point or series of points, no game or even a shot, stands out. But by the mystifying logic of allegiances—mine then was with Wawrinka's fellow Swiss Roger Federer, who sat out the tournament because of his knee—the player I hoped would win won, and so I left feeling the flush we feel when our player is victorious. This emotion might be what led me to spend close to \$100 on a hoodie on our way out.

An equally strange thing had happened when we arrived that evening, I recall. When we got to our seats, we found that an older New York couple were already seated in them. After a few words—it was explained to me that these had always been this couple's seats—we took other seats nearby, trying to be good sports. This could only go on so long. The chain reaction of displacement caused by those people sitting in our seats, and our sitting in someone else's seats, and so on, had to end somewhere, and before long a stadium attendant stepped in to inform the older couple that it did not matter how many years they'd been sitting in those seats, they'd have to move to those two empty seats up there. He pointed, and they, unhappily, moved.

Then: "Ready. Play." Then: "Game. Set. Match. Warwinka."

That first tournament started a tradition in my family, and in the years that have followed, we've returned to Queens for part of the Open. In 2017 we chose a day session, where you can come and go from match to match, and brought along our son, who was then 6. After some rain, we watched Sloan Stephens defeat Ashleigh Barty in the third round, on Stephens' way to the women's championship. The following year, on Louis Armstrong Court, we watched Naomi Osaka defeat Aryna Sabalenka, before Osaka went on to win the championship as well. Our son has grown increasingly interested in following the matches over the years—having

watched these two champions in their early rounds—and in 2019, during a match on Louis Armstrong, when Karolina Pliskova overcame Ons Jabeur after losing the second set 6-4, he seemed to understand the idea of a comeback. Later, Wawrinka's three-set win over Paolo Lorenzi gave me two opportunities to try to explain to him how to score a tiebreaker. My wife listened in as well.

Before the 2019 Wawrinka match on Armstrong, we'd been joined by some friends who had traveled from Florida for a few days at the Open. These are people my wife grew up with in the Jacksonville suburbs. Through some of the afternoon, we'd all sat in the stands of an outer court together to try to catch a glimpse of Coco Gauff playing doubles. The lesson my son learned here was to avoid crowds—and huge and hopeless lines—by sitting in a court adjacent to the one where the popular action is taking place. If you crane your neck, or stand on the bleachers, you can see. And there was no



more popular action in the tournament's early rounds than Coco's.

In my son's first two years at the Open, we'd left as the shadows began extending across the grounds, as the day started to cool off. With out-of-town friends, though, and our son now starting to follow along with the games, enjoying himself, we decided to stay into the evening. (The lesson: bang for bucks.) When Wawrinka left the court, finishing out the day session, we were instructed to exit the stadium; we'd be readmitted once the stands were emptied of trash. The group of us—my wife and I, our Florida friends, our son—left our seats, but then decided to mill about the concourse: One of us bought a signature vodka cocktail, my son found a gift shop and then the bathroom, and no one with the Open seemed to care. The ushers ushered other people. As the night session was about to open, we and a few other sneaks who'd not left made our way to the first row of Armstrong's north-end upper level, a set of balcony seats behind the Plexiglas. From there, sandwiched by my wife and son—him at the end of the row—we watched the first evening match, Ukrainians Elina Svitolina and Dayana Yastremska, where he learned that two people from the same place might want to beat each other, and beat each other bad. Svitolina crushed her countrywoman, winning the match's first nine points, the first four games, and all six games of the second set.

Then came Daniil Medvedev. The Russian was set to play Spain's Feliciano Lopez.

Though I was somewhat richly steeped in professional tennis, especially men's tennis, as an adolescent tennis-camper and later a high school player through the early 1990s, in my adulthood, I've mainly followed the easiest things to follow, starting with Federer and the Williams sisters, the other top men who've rivaled Federer, and then the American women—Stephens, Madison

Keys, Coco—coming up after Venus and Serena. I had not heard of Naomi before seeing her play and then rooting her on at the 2018 Open. Most of the other names of the players I mention above I have had to look up while writing. Before seeing Medvedev play Lopez, I'd have said the very same thing about both of them.

And thinking back to the match—which Medvedev won, in four sets—my memory of the match's points and games, any of the shots, is as hazy as when I try to think back to Wawrinka playing Djokovic in 2016. We left before the conclusion of Medvedev's match, although waiting in a huge and hopeless line for our car service, I followed along to the end, getting more and more depressed, on a radio earpiece provided within the National Tennis Center by a credit-card company.

Still, I will never forget the boos. They came in the first set, about 40 minutes in. Medvedev, playing however he was playing (I don't recall, all I recall is the boos), was approached by a ball person, his arm outstretched with a towel Medvedev apparently had no interest in, because the Russian yanked the towel angrily and then barked at his offender before tossing it aside. This I did not see as it happened—only later, at home, on the internet. I must have been explaining something to my son, teaching him a lesson. Nor did I see Medvedev toss his racquet after the chair umpire, Damien Dumusois, issued a warning for this unsportsmanlike display. But at this point, the boos beginning to build, my attention—from wherever it had wandered—was nearly back to the court and the delay of the match. Still, when Medvedev committed his worst offense, a sly, covert extension of his right middle finger alongside his temple, aimed at the crowd, in my direction, and out of sight of the chair umpire, who might have issued a point penalty for this visible obscenity, I didn't see that, either. Perhaps my seat was too high up to make out



the details.

“What’s going on?” I asked my wife amidst the rising ruckus.

Then, on the Jumbotron, it appeared—only in New York: a still image of Medvedev and his bony little middle finger.

“Look,” I said to my son, pointing. “Just look at that! Look what he did! To us!”

When my son plays sports—and writing this now is painful, sheltered in place with no sports to play all summer, it seems, even where we’ve landed in the Pacific Northwest—I encourage good sportsmanship, and try to practice it myself. No spitting in his hand before lining up after the last out. No throwing his racquet, a thing that I, a total head case, was known for doing. (I smashed a few, too, in my day, my worst moments.) Watching his Little League games under the FDR Drive and in the shadow of the Con Edison power plant, I would stand back, avoiding the other parents, especially in tight spots, sticking close to my wife and her sharp elbow, which can quickly deliver the message to cool it. As the feeling swelled in me and I began to boo, I glanced down to register discomfort appearing on the faces of our friends from down south. We were being bad sports. The whole lot of us—all of us New Yorkers.

Then all was booing. My wife, my son, and I booed irrepressibly. “Boo,” I said. “Go ahead—let’s boo!” It was so fun. And it lasted so long:

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOO—[b r e a t h e!]—
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOO!

Throughout that summer and fall, my wife and I talked a lot about leaving New York. We’d been there 20-plus years by then, and we were a little over it. The typical city worries of the suburban people in my life—those who’ve encouraged us out there, to

wherever—weren’t the worries we had. We never minded watching Little League under the highway overpass. Our New York public school was good; our boy’s got all the advantages he could ask for anyway. And though private grass and gardens are available in Portland, we weren’t looking for outdoor space attached to our home; in making our choice of rental, we thought a claw-foot tub and brightness suited us better than the isolation possible with a yard.

And about those suburbs. By the time we left, the suburbs were already upon us in the city anyway: Targets and Chick-fil-A, plus new construction—every bit of it luxury, it seemed—with all the character of my hometown subdivision, though at prices that boggle the mind. We’d become increasingly aware that the booming and its accompanying blinding could only go on so long before so much of what made New York home over the past two decades will have gone away.

Yet leaving—leaving just before summer 2020. From March through May we stayed mainly indoors, like everyone, while New York at large suffered immeasurable loss. Our grief grew as people became sick and many died—some we knew—and the city shuttered, much of what we still loved perhaps lost forever. To keep busy, avoiding crowds, we played a little catch in the concrete park, Peter’s Field, that remained open a few blocks from home, but my son’s endurance was low under a mask, without his uniform and the other kids swarming grounders. There was tennis in Peter’s Field in our final weeks, too, Wilson EZ nets hosting lessons and matches for grown-ups, some old-timers still playing, each at one end of the three painted courts that fill the northeast quadrant of the park, assuming their places, where they’d always been.

This was a terrible time. And a terrible time to leave.

It turns out we’ve liked the sort of rude

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New York is famous for. Looking back, part of being a good sport with the older couple who'd taken our seats those years ago, who'd insisted on the rightness of their cause as our New York elders, due our deference, was accepting, at some level, the rightness of their rudeness. Another case of mystifying allegiances.

A fellow New Yorker (once one, always one), the writer Zadie Smith, said in a 2017 essay that we live under the banner of the city when, stepping out from our tunnel vision, we help—collectively—the mother whose stroller has collapsed. How times have changed.

She writes, “We can often be found screaming at strangers in the street but we just as frequently pick them up off the floor.” But New York isn't what it used to be; and maybe that means New Yorkers aren't the same either. “Like many a New Yorker right now,” Smith continued, in 2017, invoking a fear that feels prescient now:

I talk a good game but my mind is scattered, disordered. To me, the city itself feels scattered, out of sorts; certainly carrying on like London, like Paris, but also, like those places, newly fearful, continuing with its routines while simultaneously wondering whether it still wants to, considering decamping to the countryside while being repulsed by that same thought.

Perhaps that's another reason the boo felt so good, and feels so good now in my memory, with our annual trip to Queens almost surely canceled along with all those other summer sports. With so many New Yorkers, many the wealthy from our old neighborhood, decamped to the countryside, their country houses. (Staying in the city, not decamping, until we left the city—and this move was long planned, I find myself telling people, the movers, the Portland car dealer—

We were being bad sports. The whole lot of us—all of us New Yorkers.

was a point of pride, but all we ever did was stay indoors.)

And now that we've left, in the coming years we're far more likely to decamp from our new small city to the countryside than to the suburbs, and no doubt we felt (and feel), with Smith, this newfound fear that New York isn't going to continue on with its routines for much longer, all the necessary recovery notwithstanding. Booing Medvedev—a final tennis lesson, I suppose—was another way to fly the flag. And in my family, it seems that we booed as long as we did to say goodbye, repulsed a little by the thought of leaving (yes, booing that, too), but booing in a moment when booing made New York feel like it still wanted to be New York, that it still could be. ➔

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