

Sometimes, the cliché's the thing

YOU AND A FRIEND ARE WATCHING a pro match between two Frenchmen, Gaston Cliché and some other guy whose name is not important to this anecdote. During the post-match interview, the TV courtside reporter asks, "Mr. Cliché, how would you rate your performance today?"

"I was really on top of my game," he replies. "I was in the zone, painting the lines, winning the big points, and in the end, I raised my game to another level, stayed within myself, played the points one at a time, gave 110 percent, and, with all praise and thanks to the Lord, I was able to close it out. Of course, the match was a lot closer than the score indicated."

Your friend turns to you and says, "Huh?"

If you've ever had the feeling that deciphering tennis-speak requires a trained translator, you're not alone. Somewhere in the storied evolution of tennis, every aspect

of a tennis match has been reduced to a meaningless cliché. Only those truly versed in the language of the letcord fully understand what today's pros mean when they utter those tried-and-true retorts.

"You have to take every player seriously," top-ranked players say about lesser opponents. Translation: "He's a nobody. If he beats me, he's a hero; if I beat him, no one cares. I wish he'd just go home."

You've heard the gracious victor say of his vanquished opponent, "It's not that he played a bad match. I was just really on today." Translation: He sucked.

Sore losers (and you know who you are) are fond of the line that goes something like, "He really didn't do anything to hurt me. I just wasn't playing my game." Translation: I sucked.

How many times have we heard this one: "You have to win the big points." Is this, in fact, true? Can't you win a match by winning all the small points? After all, there are

usually more small points, right? Besides, how do you know when the big points occur? Maybe the chair umpire should declare it before the serve: "O.K., people, this is a really big point here, so pay attention!"

"If he keeps winning, he'll really be a force in this tournament." I love this one. If a player can manage to be a force in a tournament without winning, that would be impressive.

"I'm not concerned about my ranking. I just care about winning the Grand Slam events." Yeah, sure. Everybody knows it's a player's fondest dream to win a big tournament and then vanish into oblivion again.

"I'm just going to go out and play my game." Players say this before facing an opponent who they know they'll be trounced by. O.K., go play your game. But if you'd play Pete Sampras's game, maybe you'd win.

How about, "The score doesn't indicate how close the match was." Then, what, exactly, does the score indicate?

"When he's on top of his game, no one can beat him." So, what if two players are on top of their games at the same time and they have to play each other?

Then there's the increasingly popular, "I'd like to thank God for helping me win today." So why has God chosen to help you and not your opponent? Why would that be? Is your rival a sinner? Has he been worshipping Satan?

I can see that God would help my game if, say, He was my doubles partner. Short of that, I don't see Him carrying me through a match.

Even we recreational players get caught up in tennis clichés—phrases that we use only because we hear everyone else use them, even though we don't have the slightest idea of what they mean. Ask anyone at a local club how to serve, and the conversation inevitably continues as follows:

"The key to the serve is to *pronate*."

"Um . . . what's 'pronate'?"

"You do it when you serve."

"But what is it?"

"It's . . . you know . . . what you do when you serve."

You could keep after him, but it wouldn't matter. No one really knows what it means. They can tell you it has to do with your arm and your serve, but that's about it.

Of course, you can use that fact to your advantage. The next time a friend asks you, "What'd that guy mean when he said he was having trouble 'playing within himself?'" just tell him, "It means he needs to pronate more." ●



You sometimes need a translator to understand the language of the pros.

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