

Inside Out **Courting success**



Credit: Tom Lovelock / AELTC

In the grip of tennis fever, Christopher Gillett asks: 'Why are successful opera singers just like Andy Murray?' Clue: it's not about modelling expensive watches.



Screaming Russian blondes, dodgy English weather, Pimms, strawberries and cream, the highs, the lows... it's the time of year when a singer's mind focuses on one place. No, not Glyndebourne. Wimbledon.

Opera singers and tennis players have a huge amount in common, but before you struggle with the stereotypical image of some vast Brünnhilde waddling around Centre Court in horned helmet and trainers, I'll tell you why. Oh, too late. Well, I'll carry on anyway.

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No matter what anyone thinks about the physique of singers, we are athletes, our particular physical skill relating to various muscles dotted around our bodies. Like professional tennis players we spend a lot of time travelling, spending our days practising and our evenings in hotel rooms, being careful what we eat, resting and watching bad television. We are as susceptible to the foibles of illness and injury. The affections of the crowd can be as fickle; uplifting when we're in favour, crushing when we're not. A top singer's entourage may not include quite as many coaches and physiotherapists as a tennis champion's but it can sometimes get pretty close. The star performers even gets to promote the same expensive watches.

Those similarities are just on the surface. It's inside the brain where it gets really interesting. The difference between, say, the Andy Murray who can never win a Grand Slam title and the Andy Murray who can has, it seems, little to do with his technical ability but more to do with the idea in his head that he can. It's the same with singing opera.

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Most people think we sing with our vocal cords when in fact we sing with our heads. The great singers have the ability to focus on how to win the match, no matter what gets thrown at them. In tennis, unlike football or most first-past-the-post sports, the player will inevitably lose games in the course of winning the match. It's the way the sport is designed. The weak player will lose a game and start to think that that's it, they're playing badly, they can't get the serve in or make a decent return. The good player, however, loses a point and moves swiftly onto the next without getting bogged down in a postmortem. It's the hardest and yet the most crucial thing to do.

And so it is with the great singers. They don't let a vocal blip or any disappointment in their own performance weigh upon them. They pick themselves up and move on. It's as thrilling and fascinating to watch as any Grand Slam match.

Me, I've never made it anywhere near the finals. But I keep showing up for the tournaments, making a little progress, some days more than on others, but increasingly ending up in the commentary box for the last week.

Pass me those strawberries, will you?

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