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Bruce Jenkins > INSIDE TENNIS

More Columns

The season that never, ever ends

Story Highlights

- Only hardcore fans can manage to keep pace
- Players dislike current tour length, which spar
- The effects can be seen in the number of play

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I dreamed last night I was some sort of amoeba, capable of splitting myself into independently functioning pieces. Some difficulties arose -- it took me two hours to decide between trail mix and Froot Loops - - but there was one enormous benefit. For the first time, I was able to stay in touch with the men's tennis tour.

There I was in Zagreb, Croatia, watching local heroes Marin Cilic and Ivo Karlovic play an ATP indoor event. I was also in Santiago, Chile, for Fernando Gonzalez' surprising loss in the semifinals, as well as Johannesburg, South Africa, for the Feliciano Lopez-Gael Monfils match. I would have stayed longer, somewhere, except I couldn't find Roger Federer, Andy Murray or Juan Martin del Potro to save my life.

These tournaments were so obscure, so utterly ignored by the American press, you might be surprised to learn they were taking place at once. It must be one hell of a successful sport if it can blithely send its players around the globe for three simultaneous events, but it's a terribly misguided sport, as well. This is the tour that never ends (for women, as well), and in fact seems to expand uncontrollably. Only the real tennis nuts follow it with a passion, while the general public waves the white flag of surrender.

I'm currently in San Jose, where the wounded Andy



A longer offseason could have benefitted Robin Soderling, whose elbow injury contributed to a first-round loss Down Under.

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Roddick will try to singlehandedly keep the SAP Open in a must-see frame of mind. There's another tournament going on in Rotterdam, and because it's not a cracking good week on the men's tour without a third event, they're playing one in Brazil, as well.

Next week: Memphis, Marseille and Buenos Aires. The week after: Acapulco, Dubai and Delray Beach, Florida. Seriously. I am not making this up.

Too much. Way, way too much tennis. There's nothing wrong with a veritable avalanche of play, such as a two-week stay at Wimbledon, watching all the best men, women, girls and boys play on exquisite grass courts all day long. Fans depart all the majors in a swirl of nostalgia, wishing it could last just a little bit longer. It's just that tennis knows no off-season; it doesn't know how to take a break, give everyone a rest, create a worldwide mood in which people actually start missing the sport.

Checking the men's calendar for 2010, you assume it's some kind of joke. The first tournament started Jan. 4 in Qatar, and without a break of any consequence, the "season" lasts through the third week of November (the World Tour Finals in London) and into early December for the Davis Cup finals. "It's ridiculous to think that you have a professional sport that doesn't have a legitimate off-season to rest, get healthy and then train," Roddick said recently. "I think too much is asked of us, playing 11 months of the year. It don't think it takes a brain surgeon to figure out why people are getting hurt. It's just in the best interests of the game that we get some kind of off-season."

Roddick, stifled by the onset of a nerve problem in his right arm, was one of several stars playing hurt at the recent Australian Open. In just the third week of the year, a time when everyone should be fresh and invigorated, there were significant injuries to Roddick, Del Potro, Murray, Rafael Nadal, James Blake, Mikhail Youzhny, Marcos Baghdatis, Lleyton Hewitt, Robin Soderling and Tommy Haas during the tournament. There was more chaos on the women's side, notably the banged-up Serena Williams and Dinara Safina, who had to withdraw from the first tournament of the year (in Brisbane), due to severe back pain, and limped out of Melbourne, as well.

We have reached the point where a complete, healthy, top-flight field is a virtual impossibility -- anywhere, any time. When Serena earned the year's No. 1 ranking late last year in Doha, Qatar, she was up against what Inside Tennis writer Matt Cronin described as a "physically devastated" field. By late October on the men's side, a series of injuries and withdrawals left the stands shockingly empty for the inaugural Shanghai Masters. Fans have become all too familiar with the kind of physical or emotional burnout that has tormented the likes of Nadal, Andre Agassi, Marat Safin, Justine Henin, Kim Clijsters and Maria Sharapova in recent years.

"The way it's structured," said Venus Williams, "the tour runs away its top players when they should be at the height of their wisdom and talent. But it's impossible to play 10 years in a row, 11 months of the year and be physically and mentally ready. It's too brutal. We lose a lot of star power because of how relentless it is."

The critiques keep coming, from the likes of Nadal, Boris Becker, John McEnroe, Jim Courier, Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, all calling for major schedule revisions. Is anyone listening? Apparently not, for there is no stopping the overwhelming forces of worldwide opulence.

Pick any city on either tour -- it's a seemingly endless list -- and there are extremely wealthy people who can't wait to spend millions of dollars, sponsor a pro event, put on their tennis shorts, schmooze with the elite and generally act like bigshots. These are magnificent, cosmopolitan cities, for the most part. Players see the irresistible lure of travel, revenue, rankings points, reputation, and perhaps some exotic late-night companionship (never rule out the sex factor at the top level of any sport).

Taken individually, each of these events looks wonderful. It doesn't seem to matter that a given field won't be close to Grand Slam caliber, or if attendance is bleak (I watched Ryan Harrison, an up-and-coming American to watch, play his first-round match before about 100 people in San Jose on Monday afternoon). There's always something in it for someone, and the endless circus plays on.

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"True, players aren't forced to play in every event," says longtime coach and television analyst Brad Gilbert, "but there's always that pressure that you might be missing something." Gilbert should know. A relentless competitor, he powered his way to the No. 6 ranking by the end of 1989 despite not having won a single match at a major.

The year-end tournaments are at the heart of this issue. By all rights, they should be vitally important, with a ton of prestige at stake, but that is hardly the case -- at least from the public's viewpoint. Who follows these things? Who really cares about wintertime rankings when the U.S. Open brought such apparent closure, right as the NFL season kicked off?

I always think of Pete Sampras, who, like Jimmy Connors, really wanted that year-end No. 1 ranking. You don't get there without maniacal dedication, commitment and endurance; it's among the most difficult achievements in all sports. For years, Connors held the record of five consecutive years at the top, and Sampras wanted it for himself. When he finally got his sixth, in 1998, it was a feat along the lines of breaking Jim Brown's career rushing record.

Tributes and recognition: almost none, outside Sampras' immediate circle. That's what wrong with the pro tennis tour.

Next week: Maybe there's a way out of this.

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