

Six Crooked Nails. Santiago 1976, the Italian Davis  
di Dario Cresto-Dina  
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Santiago was under Pinochet's government and nobody wanted to go and play tennis there. Everybody thought about it as "the bloody cup". We don't even have a single image that records it. The Italian public TV (RAI) refused to send its operators and the Chilean TV recordings were destroyed by fire. Twenty minutes and forty-two seconds of a flickering film is all that we have about the event. Yet the 1976 Davis Cup is the only Italian success in the most ancient of tournaments for national teams. Now, after forty years, literature accounts what the reports avoided at the time. Things such as the overshadowed triumph of the national Italian tennis team, the "azzurri", wearing red t-shirts for the occasion; the story of a handful of men – Panatta, Bertolucci, Barazzutti, Zugarelli, with their non-playing captain (NPC) Pietrangeli – who acquired glory and lost it afterwards.

Dario Cresto-Dina writes for "la Repubblica" since 2000, after twenty years working for the "Stampa". Together with Paolo Berizzi he has already published *Il mio piede destro. La vera storia di Antonio Cassano, campione fuori*. (Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2005).

## Dario Cresto-Dina **Six crooked nails**

1.

You are about to read the story of a very short-lived joy.

On Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1976, while the Beatles, by then a legend of music, rejected an offer of fifty billions to play together in concert once more, four fabulous Italian men in shorts won the world tennis tournament for national teams in Santiago del Chile.

They will never be legendary! All we have to testify to the event is some scarce documentation and some fragmentary reports.

The winning point for the team was the victory in the doubles match: the Italians Panatta and Bertolucci beat the Chileans Fillol and Cornejo in four sets: 3-6 6-2 9-7 6-3.

The previous day Barazzutti had beaten Jaime Fillol with the score 7-5 4-6 7-5 6-1, and Panatta led the "azzurri" on to a 2-0 lead, beating Patricio Cornejo with a wonderful 6-3 6-1 6-3 score line. The final match would end with the score 4-1. They played the last two single matches on a hazy Sunday when Panatta won against Fillol 8-6 6-4 3-6 10-8 and the yet unknown Belus Prajoux beat Zugarelli 6-4 6-4 6-2.

Nicola Pietrangeli still carries the proof of that success in his wallet: an old black and white photo that he shows in excitement every now and then.

As team leader Pietrangeli gained what he had twice lost as a player in 1960 and in 1961, both times against Australia. He had been a great player!

The old image shows a crown of hands raising the Davis Cup, something like a tureen where you could possibly mix an English punch or a *sangria*. But the joy is not complete, there's something in the air that makes it look like a melancholic feast.

FLORENCE, APRIL 30<sup>TH</sup> – MAY 2<sup>ND</sup> 1976

Italy 5 – Poland 0

Bertolucci – Drzymalski 7-9 6-4 6-4 6-2

Panatta – Dobrowolski 6-1 6-0 6-3

Panatta Bertolucci – Drzymalski Jasinski 6-1 6-4 8-6

Bertolucci – Dobrowolski 6-4 6-4 6-3

Panatta – Drzymalski 6-1 6-0 6-4

2.

Nevertheless they had been lucky; they had been selected by luck.

Maybe because they never quit playing as children do. Time has not changed them the way it does with the most of us, it only got them somewhat complicated.

They enter the tennis court in the same way, always making the same gestures just a little bit slower and more rigid.

Those moves are full of what they used to and still have: pride, indifference, poetry, sacrifice, fury; qualities and weaknesses that complete each other, together with a technical ability never seen before or after that moment, in that fashion, in any team and any time.

3.

In a delightful booklet where travel diaries, ideas for movies, considerations, mystery and love micro-stories are mixed, the film maker Michelangelo Antonioni portrays a habit I never realized I had always tried to practice until I read his words: "When I don't know what to do I start watching. There's a technique even to do this. There are many, indeed. I got my own way, that is to go back to a state where things start from images".

Just like Antonioni goes back to the state of things, watching the legs of tennis players to measure the general physical effort is similar to watching women's hands, their color, their sun spots, the swollen veins and the wrinkles in the hollow wrist, to unravel the secrets of their age.

It is exactly the same for athletes. The muscle that begins to retreat, whilst the tendon, now stretched and fragile like a bird's bone, exposes a painful back, a nail in the shoulder with its excruciating pain at each service, an elbow now unable to push a two-handed backhand to the right corner.

I did not dare to watch their legs. I didn't even confess this strange impulse to Adriano Panatta, Corrado Barazzutti, Paolo Bertolucci e Tonino Zugarelli.

I met Barazzutti and Zugarelli in a training session on a clay court and their legs were completely covered by sweatpants, maybe for comfort, maybe for decency.

The American Pulitzer prize writer John McPhee begins his book 'Tennis' describing the extraordinary legs of Arthur Ashe in the act of serving, the most technically difficult shot in this sport: «With the feet apart and slightly bent knees, Arthur Ashe throws the ball up and forward. He says that if he lets it come down too much, "it would make an arc falling on the grass one meter from the bottom line". He'd tried and tried the shot before but now it was not a try. He extends his body leaning forward too far beyond the balance point. He is almost falling down but thanks to gravity the muscle action of his legs reaches his arms so that the racket goes higher than the ball».

Arthur Ashe died of Aids due to a blood transfusion during his second heart surgery. It was 1993 and he was only 50 years old. Between the Sixties and the Seventies he had been one of the strongest players on the tennis circuit. Light and elegant he had been a gentleman in the court just like in everyday life. He fought for the rights of black people, of women and for colleagues of other categories. He won three of the Grand Slam tournaments: the US Open in 1968, the Australian open in 1970 and Wimbledon in 1975 where he beat Jimmy Connors at the fourth set in the final match.

When he was a teenager Ashe was shorter than average and was a little unsteady. At the time of the service described by McPhee he was taller than 1.80 m, his weight just under 70 kg, and his very long legs allowed him to accentuate the push like a trampoline. McPhee writes: «If only he had less muscles we could call him frail, but the coordination of his movements is such that the ball propels from the racket with a striking speed. He goes a step forward not to fall down and runs to the net».

This image is the pure essence of the tennis game.

Brad Gilbert was a tennis player who reached fourth place in the ATP rankings at the beginning of the Nineties. Afterwards, he became coach and guru of Andre Agassi making him number one in the world for the third time. He began studying tennis and players psychology in depth, and the legs are obviously an important part of his study.

Everything begins in the legs, above all the constant motion which is now at the base of the game, and which he describes as «a great footwork in both attack and defense during the entire match».

More or less that was Roger Federer's thinking in 2013, one of his worst years. At the time, I asked him what would make him decide to retire with honor, he said: «Fifteen years of tennis are heavy and, getting older, every day there's always a new pain: shoulder, back, legs... I don't want to drag the decline, I'll leave as soon as my legs will leave me».

Federer could count on his legs again. Next year he changed his racket to use a larger one (with an oval of 97 instead of 90 cm square), Stefan Edberg was his new coach, for more than two seasons, and he came to be number two in the world again.

We are all inexorably linked to time and time knows no regrets. We know that one day we will not repeat so easily the gestures we now do with joy, passion, and exertion. To most of us, youth is given as an ephemeral miraculous condition with no chances of extensions.

Even birth plans are just a social construct; nobody really knows when and how the baby will be born. Forty years ago our champions could play naked just like newborn babies if they wished. In 1976 they were four guys kissed by God and by sponsors. They didn't really know the world outside the small rectangle of the clay, green or hard court they used to play in every season. They were handsome and lucky, with strong legs and they won the Davis Cup. A success that had never happened before in Italian tennis. An event that made history. Only after a long time they realized what had happened, proving that memories are essential to the creation of people's identity.

Corrado Barazzutti says: «At that time we took everything for granted, always around the world, game after game». Adriano Panatta pretends a memory lapse: «I've got a very bad memory, or maybe it's just that I'm old». Paolo Bertolucci prefers to remember only the times after his agonistic life: «I've had a very happy, generous and satisfying life» he says. Tonino Zugarelli is now a good amateur golf player with a seven handicap: «Actually I don't feel like a veteran and as a replacement, my pride woke up too late in respect to that success».

Our team had to play the final matches against Chile, when the country was ruled by the fascist general Augusto Pinochet. Most Italians opposed the team trip to South America accusing them of complicity with fascism. Police had to escort them to the airport and they arrived twenty minutes late. Even the pilot mocked them regretting he couldn't leave without them unless superior command allowed him. Nicola Pietrangeli was the non-playing leader of that team. «I was 43 and I felt like a baby» he says. The end of his career began in Santiago because he was never forgiven for that achievement. One year later he was dismissed, deceived by his own team, at the end of another final match, which they lost in Australia.

Coming back from Chile an insulting silence welcomed them. Not even a mockery trumpet for that «bloody Cup», as it was named by newspapers. Not a raspberry blow in Roberto Benigni style, the satiric actor who made his debut with his new show “Onda Libera” on the second channel of public TV the same day Italy officially received the Davis Cup.

It was only a few days before Christmas and everybody criticized that cup victory. Arriving in Rome, Nicola Pietrangeli, who was actually used to far different mates, slept on all that welcoming the cup in his own bed.

BOLOGNA, 21<sup>ST</sup> – 23<sup>RD</sup> MAY 1976

Italy 5 – Yugoslavia 0

Barazzutti – Franulovic' 6-1 7-5 6-4

Panatta – Pilic' 6-3 6-4 6-3

Panatta Bertolucci – Pilic' Franulovic' 6-2 9-7 7-5

Panatta – Franulovic' 6-1 1-6 6-3

Barazzutti – Pilic' 0-6 6-4 6-4

4.

Stories always have a starting point. This time our place is London where we will go twice.

First, with a couple of friends (one was at the end of his teenage years and the other was about to start university).

On a Saturday afternoon they were watching TV in one of the typical small towns of the Italian province.

They lived in an L-shaped pale orange building, two twin blocks of five identical floors.

The first block overlooks a long and narrow lawn hosting some dwarf willows. From the other one you can see a wide paved courtyard, which is also the insulated roof of the underground car park. Just like having Wimbledon green on the one side and the American hard courts on the other. Dreams have no limits.

At the end of nineteenth century there were only five hundred tennis courts in Italy (60% of them in the north – Liguria and the lake districts of Piedmont, Lombardy and Veneto).

In 1976 the courts were 17.000 more or less, with almost 180.000 enrolled members. Sport had had a democratic spread while the country, now ruled by the Christian Democrats, was entering a difficult period of social and political conflict that will last for a long time and will be marked by blood forever.

On an illustrated sport book, our two friends found the measures of tennis courts written in a technical language and carefully copied on a school notebook the information they were looking for. After 40 years they still keep that notebook: «Tennis courts are 23.77 m. in length and 8.23 m. in width while the court for a doubles match is 23.77 m. x 10.97 m. with an alley of 1.37 m. each side of the singular court. The lines delimiting the court are called baseline and sideline. The service line is on each side of and parallel to the net at a distance of 6.40 m. Drawn in parallel to the sidelines, the center service line divides the area between the net, the service line and the sideline into two equal parts called service boxes. The net is 1.07 m. high at the post (0.914 m. at the center). The suggested width for each line is 5 cm.»

With a piece of chalk and a tape measure borrowed from their mothers the two guys draw the lines on the ground. This court is shorter and narrower, without the doubles alleys. The net is a string. They are almost obliged to play a serve and volley game because of the uneven asphalt surface.

At the end of May, Adriano Panatta wins the Italian International contest in Rome. In the final match he beats the Argentinian Guillermo Vilas after the fourth match. This guy is powerful like a bull and

patient like a spider, when playing on a clay court. He writes poetry and doesn't speak very much. Two years earlier, during an exhibition in Buenos Aires, Vilas had patented the "Gran Willy", a recovery shot between the legs giving ones back to the net. The idea had occurred to him while watching an advertisement where the most famous South American polo player shot the ball with his club between the hind hooves of his horse.

At the next seventy-fifth edition of the French Open, played in the Roland Garros stadium in the first two weeks of June, Panatta is indicated as the fifth-seeded player, but he is not amongst the favorites to win. In the quarter final he beats Björn Borg, seeded number one, who had won for the last two years. Panatta takes the Paris Grand Slam Crown easily enough, playing the semi-final and winning the final matches against Dibbs and Solomon two boring Americans who used to play very long matches.

That's his moment of glory. On the Parisian court Panatta plays at the best level of his life, but it was just a moment. After scoring the final match point, his joy lasts only for a few seconds. He will confess, many years after, how melancholy had already prevailed on adrenaline during the gala in honor of the winners - the English Sue Barker amongst the women. The champion struggles with a sense of depression that will last for more than a month.

In July you can smell the summer in the streets. Something like a mix of toasted coffee and fresh cut flowers. The hours after lunch are pleasantly motionless. In the neighborhood of the two-block building there is still an old manor farmhouse with cathedral windows, and in the apple orchard beyond the garden the mowed hay dries in the sun amidst clouds of flies.

Green canvas tents with blue and yellow stripes are spread out and the blinds closed in search of shadow.

Our two guys obstinately keep on playing their ever-lasting match, careless of the rules of the building which impose a cloister silence from one to three o' clock in the afternoon. Mauro, the elder one, has a Maxima Torneo while Guido plays with a Dunlop Maxply. They are second-hand rackets each of nearly half a kilo. It is July the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1976 and it is Saturday. In the courtyard the wood and the strings of the rackets make no noise.

5.

On the same afternoon, Ilie Năstase is making his entrance into the central Court at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club of Wimbledon. It is like a magic temple with its imperishable and unreasonable beliefs. Only a few minutes earlier, while his opponent was already going out from the locker rooms, Năstase accurately brushed his long hair. Now he touches the hair once more and adjusts the collar of his Adidas shirt dutifully stuck in the shorts. These are the gestures the Romanian player uses to avoid the tension. The gipsy, the dirty and bad one, the «Nasty», as they say; the most anarchic, irreverent, disgusting, entertaining and free champion of the international circuit amongst the number ones in the world. He perfectly kisses the hand of ladies and he can't stand his old Pygmalion, business partner and double match mate anymore. Ion Tiriac is guilty of reminding him what a good player he is and how little he won in comparison. He used to say: «You are the best player with the worst results».

Ilie is chased by crowds of beautiful women - they will say he had more than a thousand women - and by his own show. Gianni Clerici wrote about him that he invented the music hall. Nobody ever understood him. «Intelligent people find it easy to be intelligent, so just imagine how easy it is for a fool like me to be a fool».

He had already been at Wimbledon four years earlier and that time, on another Saturday afternoon, he wretchedly lost a final match, for which he was tipped to be the favorite, against the American Stan Smith. Everything was lost after a comic and desperate quarrel with his rackets that hadn't been prepared with the right tension by a damn tuner. Panatta lent him one of his own rackets but it was useless. Smith won the match at the fifth set: 4-6 6-3 6-3 4-6 7-5.

Today he is the favorite again. He arrived at this final match with a record of no lost sets. And yet he is afraid. He will be thirty in two weeks and he knows there won't be a third chance for him. Entering the court he looks up in the tribunes thinking: «They want to see me winning, they think I cannot lose. But on the other side there's a wall and when you play against the wall, the wall is the only winner».

The wall is walking a few steps behind. He is blond and very handsome. Sweden is crazy for him and for the Abba. Björn Borg is dressed by Fila, a brand that will become an icon in the sportswear. With a mass of hair held by a band and a wood and stone necklace, Borg walks across the tunnel like an

overgrown teddy bear, staring at the ground a little hunched. He now looks like a passing tourist or a fan who broke through the security coming down the stands. But it is exactly here he had imagined to arrive when he first used a racket at the age of eight, pretending to play the final match point in Wimbledon. He is now 20 years and 27 days old, he is the teenagers' idol and he is engaged with a colleague he will marry in 1980. She is Mariana Simionescu and (what a coincidence!) she is Romanian.

Like Năstase, Borg reached the final without losing a single set. In his semi final he had beat «Boom Boom» Tanner, the curly American who serves at 200km/h. After that he had thanked God and his coach Lennart Bergelin (almost a father to him) for having brought him to London 15 days before the beginning of the championship to practice his service and make it deeper and angled. A service much more suitable to the green court. Watching Năstase from the back he thinks how hard it is to play against him. Till that moment Ilie had almost always prevailed over him. He is annoyed to hear him shouting crap. No one ever understands what his intention is. Perhaps not even he knows it. Borg knows he can expect any kind of shot, always with a different effect.

Only when the two players reach their own place just under the umpires' chair, while placing their rackets – five each – Borg notes that Năstase has not yet addressed a word to him. He feels the Romanian nervousness and thinks about the words Bergelin had said that morning in the hotel. It was not an assumption but a real prophecy: «Go and play, my guy, you will make it and you will be the first Swedish in history to raise Wimbledon trophy as a winner».

The other two guys are now sitting on their chairs too. Armchairs and sofa are too far from the TV set for them. They don't want to lose any detail of the match.

The TV set has been moved on a cheap piece of furniture that looks like a throne, the carpet is as green as was Wimbledon central court till the end of the first week of the championship. They stay there, stiff as sentinels, feeling a tension not even their favorite player feels. Ilie is a myth for those little gypsy fools of the courtyard.

Everybody knows the way it ended. At the first set Năstase scores 3-0 and if he earns the break point it could be 4-0. Until that moment he had almost mocked Borg. During the change of ends he sipped his cold tea and amused the public diverting a ball with his head. They were all on his side with great affection. Ilie misses the break and with that his very last occasion in the temple of tennis.

The blond player from the North gets the match scoring 6-4 6-2 9-7.

Björn Borg's first triumph at Wimbledon is a revolution for tennis.

The topspin technique prevails over the old gestures game played till that point. The topspin forehand is a must on the modern tennis court from which the player can achieve powerful passing shots. It goes from bottom to top, handling the racket on the strings and sliding the hand towards the end closing it completely. That's a scandal for the aesthetes of the sport. Borg's double-handed backhand, which he learnt by Ice hockey, gives him the chance to gauge long line passing shots with incredible paths never tried before.

Tennis is now a secular sport no longer reserved to the angels of the sky. It is modern and nothing will be the same again. It's like a Cartesian reform carried forward by an atheist who looks like Jesus. Gianni Brera compares him to a countryman with his tools, strictly linking him to the roots of earth. Năstase once said: «We all play tennis, he plays something else, he comes from another world».

Guido and Mauro with tears in their eyes stand still without speaking a word.

They won't go back to their own court for a long time leaving the rain to wash chalk lines away together with a very special summer.

That same year at Wimbledon Panatta beat the Venezuelan Jorge Andrew and the Australian Dale Collings, before to surrender to the American Charlie Pasarell, even after a good start and sets advantage. Tonino Zugarelli abandoned the scene at the first round against the clever and wicked Jimmy Connors. After two winning matches against the Hollander Rolf Thung and the Australian Ross Case, Jaime Fillol was beaten by the New Zealander Onny Parun.

In his final match, Borg often used a cortisone spray during the intervals accorded to the players any change of ends. He suffered from an abdominal pain after a troublesome muscle tear.

This pain will give him the chance to decline the call for the Davis Cup against Italy, from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July. He will be in Rome as a tourist. Sweden detained the Cup, won at Stockholm against Czechoslovakia the previous year.

Borg's absence makes the job easier to the Italians. So, London was the place where everything began.