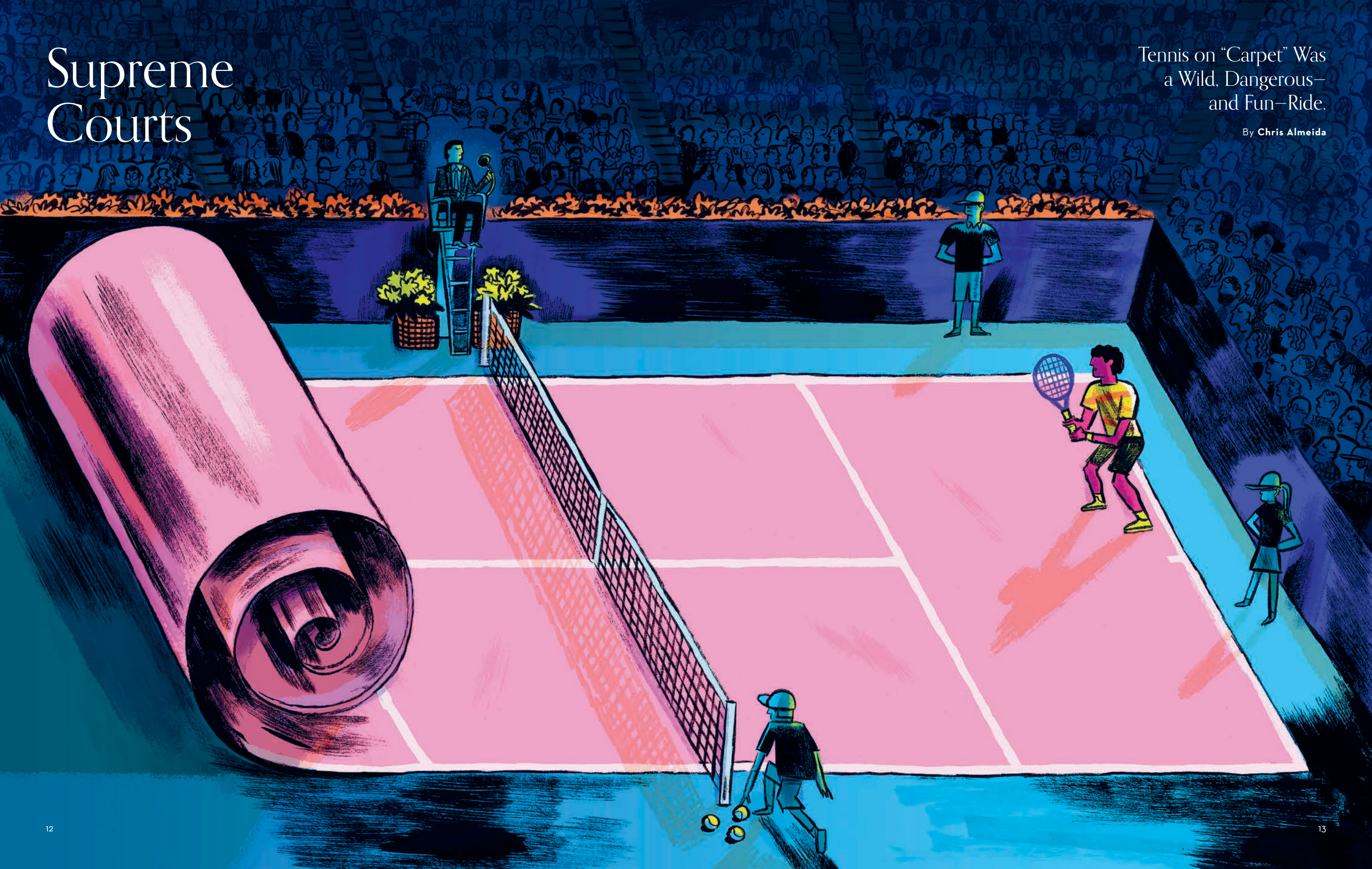


# Supreme Courts

Tennis on “Carpet” Was  
a Wild, Dangerous—  
and Fun—Ride.

By Chris Almeida





In the winter, points would go by quickly. Players would fire their serves and fly to the net, often only as a precaution. Indoors, on courts of strange colors—reds and blues and bubble-gum pinks—tennis became its most brutal, and perhaps its most honest.

Shots hugged the floor and thudded as they ricocheted off temporary barriers erected to protect crowds packed into convention centers not made for tennis at all. In spaces isolated from nature and sunlight, power and speed and clean lines materialized. The court knew what it was, and perhaps that was the problem: It was so direct and uncompromising that it provoked argument. Was it lightning in a bottle or the most sterile version of tennis that had ever existed?



Carpet courts are not carpets, exactly. They're typically a topper, a rubber mat (usually referred to as a Supreme court) or a nylon sheet, rolled out over a concrete floor. When they began popping up on the pro circuit around the late 1960s, they were largely creations of convenience. Carpet surfaces allowed for more indoor practice facilities and greater flexibility in the professional indoor season. Tennis-specific facilities were no longer needed; exhibitions and year-end tournaments could be played nearly anywhere. A match could be scheduled almost as easily at a concert hall or a basketball arena as at an indoor club.

And for nearly 30 years, carpet was the norm at indoor events; traditional hard courts and indoor clay surfaces popped up rarely. And indoor events were everywhere. "When I played, there was a lot more indoors. I might have played 10 indoor tournaments a year.... It used to be that we played a big chunk in the States in January, February—they have Europe later in the year

There seemed like four solid months a year you were playing indoor tennis," Brad Gilbert told me. "But when you look at someone like Rafa, he plays the London final and he plays Bercy."

Carpet played like a hard court with a grass court's bounce, so it's unsurprising that often the biggest carpet tournaments were won by the same players who most enjoyed Wimbledon. (The Wimbledon Club, believe it or not, has a handful of indoor carpet courts available to members.)

For much of the 1990s, Pete Sampras and Boris Becker traded the men's year-end title back and forth. Their matchup in the 1996 final in Hanover was a singular event, an avalanche of aces and desperate, grasping forehands and volleys cut at impossible angles. The first time I saw it, tumbling through a YouTube hole, it put me in a trance. Everything about it—not just the tennis, but the scene—was so...bizarre. The court, pink and without doubles alleys, sat under a lip of

The Masters Cup at Qizhong Stadium, November 2005 in Shanghai, the last year the ATP Tour Finals were played on carpet. (Nalbandian beat Federer in five.)

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angled barricades topped with flowers. The crowd, seated at court level behind the baselines, was protected by a net, like they were at a baseball game; they were blacked out by a dimmer switch, as if they were in Madison Square Garden. It was like watching tennis on an Earth just *slightly* different than ours. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

But by the turn of the millennium, tournament organizers were having second thoughts. *Fans don't want to see this.* Rather quickly, both the ATP and the WTA tours began phasing out carpet courts. Now not a single top-level event is played on the surface. The parallel Earth has disappeared entirely.

This was done, ostensibly, to reduce injuries; watch a carpet match and there is a pretty good chance you'll see a player slip.

"Probably not," Gilbert said when I asked him if the surface was consistently safe. "There were a few players who literally ruined their careers and their knees [on carpet]. Darren Cahill blew his knee out in Philly on a Supreme court that wasn't rolled that great. The same with Jay Berger. I think Peter McNamara ruined his knee in Europe on it. They could be a little sticky, and if you got stuck on it or you hit a seam, it could get a little bit tricky."

It is widely understood, though, that organizers also wanted to change their product; longer rallies were more pleasing to the average fan, and so the game changed to make them happen more often.

Courts slowed over time, with the seed mixtures and concrete formulas at grass- and hard-court tournaments adapting for higher bounces. Rally lengths in Melbourne and New York and London increased. Soon the carpet was gone, and everything that was its antithesis consumed the game; long, calculated dialogues from the baseline became the norm. Defense became the year-round fashion. By 2002, David Nalbandian and Lleyton Hewitt were trading loopy forehands in the Wimbledon final. A few years later, the transformation would be totally complete.

"Just make quicker courts, then it's hard to defend. Then attacking style is more important.... It's only on this type of slow court that you can defend the way we are all doing right now," Roger Federer said in 2013. "I've played on all different speeds. But I think some variety would be nice, some really slow stuff and then some really fast stuff, instead of trying to make everything sort of the same."

Federer, quite quickly, became the last practitioner of attacking tennis at the top of the men's game, and even then, he had to make compromises. Federer idolized Sampras as a kid and modeled his game after him. Watch some of his earliest matches and you'll see him, often indoors, with a shorter,





**Paterson.**  
RACQUET

more angular service motion and a lust for the net. But over time he changed, becoming rounder, more patient and balanced, likely out of need as much as want. Soon he and his rivals were playing each other everywhere, on every surface, for the most part, in the same way. They still are today.

The story of the carpet's death is really the story of the modern men's game and the Faustian bargain it made. It is easier to defend reliably than it is to attack; it is easier to understand what you're seeing when you see it a lot. "If you've got two big servers, it's not very fun to watch. It's like why they changed the grass. You don't see a lot of points," Gilbert said. "If you're playing on a lightning-fast carpet or Supreme court laid over cement, you're not going to see a lot of great rallies because the court is pretty quick and it's tougher to return. So it's maybe not ideal for watching, but it's something different that the players have to navigate."

A homogenous game gave fans longer rallies and fewer upsets. Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal (and, for a time, poor Andy Murray) turned finals on every surface into endurance exhibits. At the 2012 Australian Open, Djokovic played (of course) Murray in a nearly five-hour semifinal, and then (of course) Nadal in a nearly six-hour championship match. At the Shanghai Masters later that year, Murray and Djokovic played a best-of-three final that lasted three and a half hours. In 2019, even on the US Open's speedy DecoTurf, Nadal ground out a five-hour win by throwing haymakers from the back wall. "You sort of protect the top guys really by doing that because you have the best possible chance to have them in the semis at this point," Federer said in that same interview. "But should that be the goal? I'm not sure."

The game became enthralling, even as it became largely predictable. The homogenization of the surfaces traded spontaneous, fleeting genius for something different;

Boom-Boom at the ATP World Tour Finals in Hanover, Germany, 1996, where he beat Pete Sampras in a wild final.  
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something replicable, but reduced. Was it worth it?

It ended around 2005, or it may as well have. That was the last year that the ATP's Masters Cup was played on carpet. In the final, Federer (at the end of the winningest season of his career, but hampered by a rare injury to his foot) faced Nalbandian, who had just squeaked into the tournament as the world No. 8.

On a drab purple court surrounded, still, by those flower-topped barriers in Shanghai's Qizhong Stadium, Federer ground his way to a two-sets-to-love lead after two tiebreakers. The ball skipped and whistled; Nalbandian, the baseliner's baseliner, even occasionally ran toward the net. Federer's injured foot looked to cost him a quarter step, and suddenly the speed of everything had cost him his lead. In a fifth-set tiebreak, Nalbandian's shots flew faster, deeper. Somehow, he won the match. He fell to the floor. It was shocking, perhaps blasphemous. It, too, was delightful. 🎾

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