

World Tennis Gazette

Murder, Murder They Wrote — About Tennis

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'Say Craigslist, What Ya Got?'

By JOHN MARTIN

Everyone loves a murder mystery. Finding out Who Done It and How They Done It is a national obsession. Especially on television, with its alphabet stew of “CSI,” “FBI,” and “NCIS.” Plus the ever-frightening “Criminal Minds.”

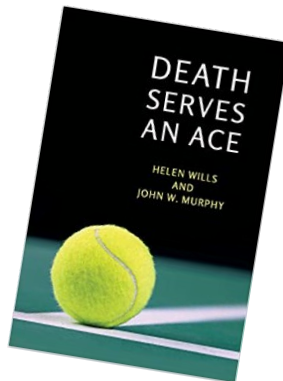
It wouldn't surprise me to find used plot lines for sale on Craigslist. What does surprise me are dozens of tennis murder plots invented and published over nearly a century or so.

Even tennis champions — ordinarily preoccupied with getting their first serves in — have found ways to use their sport as a canvas to paint the finality of homicide.

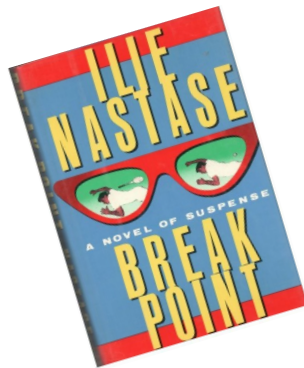
In 1939, the world champion Helen Wills co-wrote *Death Serves an Ace*. Predictably, the victim dies mysteriously.

In 1986, another tennis champion, Ilie Nastase, wrote “Breakpoint.” He assigned his killer to pull the trigger just as the victim wins the final point of his championship match. Talk about fleeting fame! Another victim dies on court of a drug overdose and a third target is gunned down in the locker room.

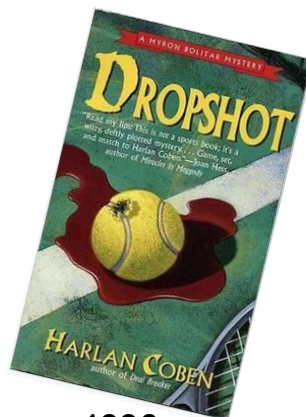
In 1996, Crime Novelist Harlan Coben started his “Dropshot” by creating a sniper who kills a presumably washed up tennis player sitting in a court-side box in Louis Armstrong Stadium.



1939



1986



1996

The movies lean more often to stupendously sloppy tennis romantic comedies. It's the tennis that's sloppy. The comedy is bearable but ordinary actors who try to mimic real tennis strokes risk winning an Oscar for Unintentional Slapstick Parody.

One movie is an exception: In 1951, the great maestro of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, squeezed brief scenes of a fictitious (creepy) tennis match at Forest Hills into the classic mystery “*Strangers on a Train*.”

What's most creepy is the scene where hundreds of spectator heads are turning back and forth following the ball except one man, the killer, staring straight ahead at his potential victim, a player on the court.

Was Hitchcock a tennis fan? Perhaps. He adapted “Strangers” from a best-selling novel that contained no tennis.

Okay, you may have noticed: I'm stalling. I still don't have an opening chapter for *Murder at the Australian Open*.

I'm pretty sure my villains will be an Irish mob family but I've got to figure out the technology.

Every TV detective now accesses surveillance cameras. Every killer needs a device to thwart the good guy (me). Maybe the gambling mob seizes control of Hawkeye's cameras to show the ball out — or in — to win its wagers. But a brave line judge challenges the bogus call. And solves the murder — or becomes its victim.

Okay, sorry, you're right. I'll keep working on this!