

Foreword by Bud Collins

Why was he running after this man, pleading, “Come on, Ilie. Don’t be that way. Come back. Please...”

Had the slim, dark-haired guy in short pants stolen something? In a way. Ilie Nastase, sometimes known as the “Bucharest Buffoon,” and, at the time, the reigning champion of France in a game called tennis, was, you might say, stealing the customers’ money by bugging out of a consequential engagement at Hynes Auditorium in Boston. He was also stealing the propriety of the season-concluding championship, the Masters, a playoff among the eight best players of 1973.

This hurt the feelings and sensibilities of the man running the tournament, Jim Westhall, who was trying to calm the picaresque and highly-strung Romanian down.

“Everybody wants to see you play, Ilie. Please don’t walk out. Please...”

Nastase specialized not only in glorious shotmaking and attracting beautiful women but in driving tennis officials nuts with frequently aberrant behavior.

His friend and compatriot, the formidable Ion Tiriac, once described Ilie as a man with a birdcage for a head, a cuckoo flying about inside. When the situation on a tennis court highly displeased Nastase – he walked.

Since it happened numerous times, along with such other discourtesies as his mooning the referee at Palm Springs, the Code of Conduct came into being, inspired by Nastase. A couple of years ago I told him that he had been disrespected, that it should have been named the Nastase Code, and he agreed.

Anyway, in the Master's round-robin phase, defending champ Nastase was losing to Czech Jan Kodes. He had been beaten earlier by American Tom Gorman, and was acting up. Mad at the crowd and the umpire, Ilie decided to depart in mid-match. To hell with it all. By exiting he was hotly roasting his own goose, disqualifying himself with a second loss.

Entering the drama: promoter Westhall and referee Mike Blanchard, begging plaintively. Sort of like the kid actor Brandon DeWilde wailing at Alan Ladd: "Shane... come back, Shane..."

They debated, forgave, reasoned, rationalized, massaged, sympathized, petitioned, coaxed, remonstrated, jollied, cooed, said pretty-please-with-whipped-cream-on-it. And salved Ilie's bruised ego, salvaging the match – and his title. Westhall and Blanchard heaved a collective "Whew!" The show went on. Placated, Nastase returned to the court, defeated Kodes after all, qualified for the semifinals, and eventually retained his crown in a triumph over Hollander Tom Okker in the final.

James Westhall was getting his merit badge in diplomatic mountaineering, climbing the slippery slope of professional tennis. It was all pretty new to him and everybody else then. Open tennis with serious prize money attached had dawned only five years before.

Jim had gotten his promotional start in actual mountains – the White Mountains of New Hampshire – four months earlier. That's where I first came across him as the organizer of the Volvo International at the venerable Mount Washington Hotel in the hamlet of Bretton Woods. It was clear that he knew what he was about, and did it in a soft-spoken, patient, understanding manner that established a good relationship with players, many of whom were demanding, or, like Nastase, other-planetary. If they were needy of whatever, Westhall came up with it. Though he had a lot of hair in those days, there was no Don King in this promoter.

Not exactly a tennis hotbed, Bretton Woods had five or six permanent residents. But Jim figured if he constructed an appealing tournament the tennis degenerates would find the way into the hills. He lured two all-time greats, the double Grand Slamming Aussie Rod Laver and the young "Brash Basher from Belleville," Jimmy Connors, to the Mount Washington Hotel, a timbered grande dame of inns, left over from the 19th century.

Also a towering 19-year-old from India who would become known as the "Madras Monsoon," courtly and exotically handsome, ebony-complexioned Vijay Amritraj. Charming the would-be snakes in his way with withering volleys, Vijay hypnotized them when they seemed most lethal – dodging match points against

Venezuelan Humphrey Hose, Laver himself and, for the title, Connors.

Charmed, too, were the clientele. By Amritraj, and by the setting prepared by Westhall with an assist from Mother Nature. They sat on a green hillside overlooking the crimson clay court, and peering at the Presidential Range beyond. Nothing like it in the wide world of tennis.

He staged an encore in 1974, and 36-year-old Laver, not quite the Old Man of the Mountain, showed he yet operated with the old left-handed mojo in beating American Harold Solomon for first prize.

Soon Jim was moving on, elsewhere in the Granite State to North Conway in 1975, and then Stratton Mountain in 1985, establishing the “Wimbledon of the Wilderness.” Another restful, picturesque atmosphere. Mountain air and scenery, and the Westhall legerdemain, agreed with the players and the fans of New England. Sadly for the game and its followers, that’s all gone. I’ll let Jim tell you the rest.

It was all great fun, the memories warm and wonderful.

I wonder if Nastase ever thanked Jim and Mike Blanchard for talking him back into the game that night in Boston. They saved his crown (a factor in his being No. 1 for the year), and soothed the crowd. The minimum he should have done was send them each a case of champagne.

In May of that year, while winning the Italian Open, a cranky Nastase had to duck a champagne bottle pitched at him by a patriotic Roman fan of his semifinal opponent, Paolo Bertolucci. Ilie picked up the empty bottle and snarled at spectators, in Italian: “Why are you so cheap, not throwing a full bottle?”

At least he didn’t feel insulted enough to walk.

Bud Collins is an NBC TV commentator, Boston Globe columnist, and tennis scholar. He is described by longtime friend Barry Lorge, himself a wonderful writer, as: “An estimable writer, broadcaster, editor, he is a man about the game whose wit, understanding and flamboyance make him more recognizable than many star players. His memory, and knowledge of tennis, its history and characters, is encyclopedic.”