

Rebecca Gower



Tennis and cricket: the kings of sport



A chubby nose and charming smile means Roger Federer can get away with crying like a little girl.

Ah, the Six Nations rugby championship. Who to support? Well, if you think along the same boring lines as my brother, then I ought to be backing England. He rang me the other day, distraught, after they had lost. "But... you support Scotland, don't you?" I said, confused. This was apparently the wrong response, but I thought it was fair enough: we've lived there for the past nine years, and recently, he's started to affect a Scottish accent. But in rugby, it would seem, Matthew is firmly on the side of the English.

He's just not open-minded enough. I mean, for me, it's not a question of England or Scotland: I reckon I would have valid reasons for supporting any of the competing teams. France, for example. I've been learning French since I was seven, and anyway, the French team have a rather fine-looking player called Dmitri. Then, my grandmother is half Welsh, so I have loyalties there; and I went to Ireland once, and I really liked it. And as for Italy, well they're undoubtedly the worst team around, so I have that inevitable sympathy for the underdog.

Not that I'm particularly bothered about rugby. There's too much mud involved, the points system is overly complicated, and I've honestly never understood people who rave about Jonny Wilkinson. I'm sure that he's a great sportsman, and a lovely person; but he comes across as criminally boring, and his neck is too big. As for that other great supposed heart throb of the game, Gavin Henson, if orange skin and alarming hair are your idea of attractiveness, then great. He's not exactly a laugh-a-minute kind of person, either: after Wales lost to Ireland, he declared that he felt "pretty depressed", which I can understand, but he followed this up by describing himself as "suicidal". It's good to see he's got things in perspective.

I do actually enjoy watching other sports, though. Football's okay, though people get much too upset about it. When England

were beaten by France in their first match of Euro 2004, David Beckham cried, and all of the commentators afterwards ranted about how unfair it was. I watched the match, and, as far as I could tell, it wasn't unfair at all: France scored two goals, England one, so England lost. That's just the nature of the sport, surely. When England lost to Portugal in the quarter-finals, all of my male friends were distraught ("We could have gone all the way" was a recurring comment in conversation afterwards), and the referee, Urs Meier, received death threats and over sixteen thousand abusive e-mails from English fans. That all rather put me off the idea of supporting the English team. When the World Cup rolls around, I'm just going to pick as obscure and unheralded a team as possible, and root for them. It would have worked at Euro 2004.

The real problem with rugby and football is that the matches don't go on for long enough. I prefer watching tennis, where they can take hours, and where the crowd are less likely to shout mindless abuse at the players. I can't convey to you how much I love Wimbledon, which unfailingly takes over two weeks of my life every summer. There's just so much human drama. Last year, for instance, there was pure soap opera: Lleyton Hewitt played with

his pregnant fiancée Rebecca Cartwright (Hayley from *Home and Away*) looking on, while Kim Clijsters, to whom Hewitt had been engaged until only nine months previously, was on her own. Roger Federer won for the third time, and cried for the third time (and for some reason – maybe just because he's got a big nose, and a lovely smile – it's so much more forgivable than Beckham's weeping), and Venus Williams beat Lindsay Davenport in the longest women's final of all time.

I used to cheer Henman on at Wimbledon. Yes, it was partly because he was British, but more because he wanted to win so badly and yet, in four quarter-finals and four agonising semi-finals, he never quite managed it. Now,

though, I'll support anyone. I like Andy Murray, because he always pre-emptively humiliates himself by saying that his opponent is going to beat him (that is the kind of thing I'd do, though unlike him, I'd always lose); but he's distressingly monotone: you'd never be able to tell anything about what he's feeling from the sound of his voice. My favourite, though, is undoubtedly Marat Safin, a Russian who gets into the game to such an extent that he's continually breaking rackets.

The best sport that there is, of course, is cricket (and, yes, I say that as someone who only really started to care last summer). It lasts for days on end, there are tea breaks involved, and the players are sweetly polite to each other a

lot of the time. The likelihood of any of the umpires receiving death threats is minimal; if anyone actually swears, there's a massive commotion about it, and the offender is normally fined. And, while I think that supporting a team on the basis of nationality is both arbitrary and pointless, and can cause real xenophobia, nevertheless, I am an England supporter.

The Ashes series was awful to watch, because you never knew how things were going to turn out: Australia couldn't believe they were losing, and England couldn't believe they were winning. That's what made it so compelling, and that's why they made such a meal of every Test. And yet, at the end of it all, we won. Oh, it was brilliant. Really, all sport should be like that.

Next big thing? Only if they learn some manners

Traditionally, award ceremonies are terribly boring affairs, consisting as they do of the losers simpering (with varying degrees of graciousness) that it's an honour just to be nominated, and the winners rambling on about the honour of being chosen from such a great selection of nominees.

Good to see, therefore, that the Arctic Monkeys, Britain's most exciting musicians (or so I'm reliably informed), are bucking the trend. Accepting the NME award

for Best British Band, the lead singer, Alex Turner, asked, "Who else was going to be the best British band at the moment?"

I'm sorry, did I say "good"? I meant, of course, "how obnoxious". I find false modesty as irritating as the next person, but out-and-out arrogance is just plain distasteful. (Yes, it may be that Turner was simply making the point that, having been glorified to such an extent by the musical press, it was inevitable that they would win; but if that's what he meant, then he

didn't make it all too clear. He sounded more like a man who believed all the hype.) I'm never going to win any awards, so I can't know for certain, but I do believe that it is possible to give an acceptance speech that is neither insincerely humble nor a withering assessment of fellow nominees.

Anyway, more to the point, why was Turner so self-satisfied? "We did the triple", he declared, as if the NME awards were the very pinnacle of the musical calendar. Well, let's keep in mind the fact

that Pete Doherty was named 'Sexiest Man' at the same event; yes, Pete Doherty, he of the drug taking, the pasty face and the disturbingly skinny legs. ("He probably smells", said one of my housemates helpfully.) How he won, unless it was meant ironically, is beyond me, though I suppose that going out with Kate Moss must somehow make you more attractive. However it happened, it seems to me that this farcical award rather devalues what the Arctic Monkeys won.