WHO IS MARTIN FÜHRER AND WHY DOES HE MAKE THE TENNIS WORLD SO NERVOUS?

MEET THE MAN AT THE CENTER OF THE FIRST TENNIS GAMBLING CASE TO SEE THE INSIDE OF A COURTROOM. HIS STORY OF EASY ACCESS TO PLAYERS AND BACKROOM BETTING SHOWS JUST HOW VULNERABLE THE GAME MAY BE.

BY SHALIN ASSAEL PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLAF HEINE

THE GAMBLING PARLORS along Vienna's Laxenburger Strasse are hungry for customers tonight. A few die-hard punters stand in the rain, peering through steamy windows for the luck that may linger inside. A man in a tight-fitting leather jacket stands on a dimly lit corner beneath a sign he hopes will entice some of them his way. *Wetten ist geil!* Betting is sexy!

Inside his shop, Bet Paradise, a half-dozen grim-faced gamblers smoke unfiltered cigarettes and sneak peeks at the curvy Serbian cashier as they keep track of various games and matches on flat screens that hang on the wall. Martin Führer, the man in the leather jacket, taps his long fingers impatiently, waiting for them to fill out their betting slips. The pressure of running his own parlor has begun to crease his 30-year-old face. He misses his old life, the one he spent as a party boy on the pro tennis circuit, where his exploits earned him the nickname the Gambling King.

Führer was everyone's friend, a former model whose looks and live-for-the-moment manner opened doors. The ATP tour was his NASDAQ. He studied picks in intimate detail, and to do his research, he paid his own way to tournaments from Miami to Monte Carlo. He hung around players' hotels and lounges, got himself invited to the right meals and parties. What began as $100 bets quickly became $1,000 ones. Before long, $10,000 was the norm. But even as Führer kicked back in players' lounges placing bets on his mobile, no one seemed to care much about the fact that he'd become one of the heaviest tennis bettors in the world.

THE FUN ENDED on May 18, 2004, when Führer won roughly $23,000 on an obscure ATP event held about 40 miles outside Vienna. An Austrian gambling firm immediately froze his bet, accusing Führer of conspiring to fix a match. Since then, he's been poison to bookies; no one will take his action. That's why he has put his savings into this parlor on the edge of the red-light district.

Führer drops onto an empty stool in front of an "Always Hot" video-poker machine. He scans the room, waiting for a Monday-night straggler to get an itch. From here, he's also watched the world's fourth-ranked player, Nikolay Davydenko, get drawn into a controversy eerily similar to his own. Last August, a London betting company voided about $7 million of bets after Davydenko unexpectedly withdrew from a match he was winning in Poland against an also-ran.

Davydenko denies any wrongdoing, but the episode exposed a world apart from the glitz and glamour of big-time tennis, in which vast reservoirs of international cash move on obscure matches. The biggest events on the tennis calendar are the four Grand Slam tournaments. More than $30 million was wagered on the Australian Open final in January—much of it while the match was in progress. The Slams also account for most of the championship points that are awarded on the tour. (Novak Djokovic received 1,100 points for his win Down Under.) But the life blood of professional tennis is the 65 tournaments the ATP hosts each year. These far-flung events give unsung players a chance to move up the rankings ladder. But because the early rounds are usually played away from the cameras, they have become prime entry points for any gambler who wishes to insinuate himself. After the ATP hired Scotland Yard investigators to launch a probe into the Davydenko affair, a dozen top players stepped forward to say they'd been approached about throwing matches while on public practice courts, in players' lounges, even in hotel rooms.

Just a few weeks ago, on Jan. 8, two former Scotland Yard policemen were hired as part of a new anticorruption unit. "Nothing is more important than the integrity and honesty of the sport," says ATP chairman Etienne de Villiers. But Martin Führer's story shows that ATP officials knew they had major problems three years before the Davydenko match and took their eyes off the ball at exactly the moment Führer was making his boldest bet.

IN A ONE-BEDROOM apartment across from a Vienna park, Führer waves off any suggestion that his access to the back rooms of the tennis world made him unique. "What makes me special? Nothing. I'm a normal guy."

Führer's gambling career began innocently enough, after his brief career as a department store model faltered. Newly married, he took a clerk's job with one of the many betting parlors in the Austrian capital and began to spend part of his paychecks wagering on his favorite sport, tennis. He'd scan the ATP's website and devour as many newspapers as he could. Soon, the wins were piling up and Führer got the itch to see how far his luck would take him.

Over the next two years, he expanded his reach, driving to tournaments throughout his country and in neighboring Germany. He'd hang out in the lobbies of the players' hotels, which he found on the ATP's website, and he got to know tour regulars by becoming a familiar (and handsome) face. Some of those he grew close to offered him one of the two credentials that each player gets for an event. And, like that, he had access to places in which overheard talk of a sprained ankle could be turned into cold cash. "The tour is a big family," Führer says. "Everybody knows everybody and would help everybody."

Ings looked into corruption rumors while at the ATP—but when he moved on his investigation didn't.

THIS PAGE: MARTIN MISCHKULNIG; OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT: CZAREK SOKOLOWSKI/AP IMAGES; DOMINIK KULASZEWICZ

Eventually, he made enough at his hobby to start flying around the world, hitting 20 tournaments a season. One of Führer's mantels holds photos of him hugging his wife in Dubai and the two mugging in Times Square. In 2003 and 2004, Führer bet more than $2.5 million on at least 200 matches.

One of his favorite betting targets was Irakli Labadze, a 6'2" southpaw from the Republic of Georgia. Labadze had moved to Austria after going pro in 1998 and was still trying to crack the Top 50 when Führer started to befriend him. "I watch his practice," says Führer. "I have lunch with him after. If I meet him at a tournament, he asks me, 'Would you like to go to a cinema?' We watch a movie, have dinner together."

As Führer paints it, their association sounds innocent enough, but some players were wary of Labadze. Justin Gimelstob, an 11-year veteran who retired last year, remembers being pitted against him at Wimbledon in 2003, when Labadze had such a serious shoulder injury Gimelstob says he wondered why his opponent even bothered to show up.

In a recent interview on Russian TV, Labadze, a 26-year-old with a 49–81 career singles record, acknowledged knowing Führer. But Führer uses cold logic to explain why he would make money betting against a friend. "Labadze is not the best player," he says, pointing out that the Georgian knew the odds were often against him. "If you bet against him, you will win very, very much money."

Mark Cridland, a tennis expert who runs an Australia-based gambling site called On The Punt, says the growing presence of big-time gamblers like Führer was obvious by 2002, but tennis officials were slow to react. "The players had free rein and suspicious matches just kept happening," he says. Bookies, of course, had the most to lose; they were the ones paying out on those matches. So a small group of them began to keep track of events they considered suspect, attempting to determine which players attracted unusual betting patterns. Not every match on their list involved a fix. Odds can move for simple reasons, like when a player shows up noticeably hurt at a public practice. Still, the oddsmakers began to look at some ATP pairings as if they were evaluating pro wrestling matches; their outcomes appeared that scripted. "It was getting out of control, even at that stage," Cridland says.

None of this was widely known by a public that was wagering more than ever on tennis, thanks to a new member of the gambling scene called Betfair. A traditional bookie sets odds, then sells them to willing customers. Betfair is much different. Like a gambling version of eBay, Betfair pairs people who are willing to offer odds with those willing to take them. The site has customers in 100 or so countries, although not in the United States—at least, not legally; the U.S. bars Internet gambling. "When you include Betfair, the turnover on individual matches can be as much as $60 million," says Cridland. "When betting is so big, any information about injuries or player motivation is gold."

In 2003, Führer wagered more than a million dollars with Betfair. He'd log into his account from a computer in the business center of a players' hotel or call an associate from the players' lounge to place bets for him. According to Gimelstob, it was easy for anyone to blend in behind the scenes. "How am I supposed to know who the friends of an Argentine player are when I barely know the player himself?" he says. "It's chaos."

Führer is almost blasé about the access. "If I saw an injury, I'd call a friend and he bet for me online," he says. "But I saw many people betting in the players' lounge."

On Sept. 23, 2003, anyone sizing up the draw for the Sicilian Championships in Palermo would have picked Labadze to win. The 84th-ranked player was up against Italy's Tomas Tenconi, then ranked 225th. But an unusual amount—$362,741—was put on Labadze to lose. The amount was six times that played on any other first-round match.

Bookies were on alert before the first point was contested in Palermo. Several called the ATP to complain that the odds were whipsawing against the favorite, as if someone knew what was about to happen. The chair umpire took the unusual step of warning both players to play hard. But once the match started, Labadze seemed listless and remained so even after a second warning. His straight-set loss earned him a $7,500 fine for lack of effort. "The problem with Labadze was that he's a total nut case," says an ex-ATP staffer. "One day he can play like Pete Sampras. The next he can't beat his neighbor."

That's one explanation. Bookmakers had another.

FIVE MONTHS into the 2004 season, Führer climbed into his BMW and drove 40 miles outside Vienna to the industrial town of St. Pölten. A small tournament was underway, and the fourth-seeded Labadze was scheduled to play a first-round match against an unseeded Austrian, Julian Knowle.

> THE ATP WAS FÜHRER'S NASDAQ, AND HE TRAVELED THE WORLD TO RESEARCH PICKS. AFTER GLAD-HANDING HIS WAY INTO PLAYERS' INNER CIRCLES, THE CASH FOLLOWED.

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

BY JOHN BARR AND WILLIAM WEINBAUM

The biggest swings in the Aug. 2, 2007, match between No. 4-ranked Russian Nikolay Davydenko and then-87th-ranked Argentine Martin Vassallo Arguello in Sopot, Poland, took place not on the court but on a London-based gambling website called Betfair. And after Davydenko went from being a prematch 1:4 favorite to an 11:1 underdog before withdrawing because of an injury, Betfair voided more than $7 million in bets made on the match.

Davydenko denies knowing who placed the wagers or why they went so heavily against him, and says unsubstantiated rumors of a Russian mafia connection are "laughable." He explains simply, "I was injured. That's why I couldn't finish the match." But according to a confidential report by ATP investigator Mark Phillips, nearly $1.2 million of the action was placed by three Russia-based Betfair account holders, and, despite Vassallo Arguello's never having taken an ATP singles title, all three bet on him to win. Here's how the money went down:

■ Before the match, Betfair user "Djults" wagers $540,942 on Vassallo Arguello to win. Fifteen minutes into the first set, with Davydenko up 2-1 and showing no signs of injury, "Djults" raises his bet, making Arguello a 1:7 favorite.

■■ Twenty-four minutes into the second set, another Betfair user, "SgeniA," wagers $368,036 on Vassallo Arguello, now a 1:5 favorite. Davydenko is down 1-3 in the set and has received treatment for pain in his left foot, but the defending champ is still ahead in the match after easily winning the first set, 6-2.

■■■ Between September 2005 and April 2007, bets placed by another user, "RustEr," had averaged $814. But with this match even after Davydenko loses the second set, "RustEr" lays $253,833 on Vassallo Arguello, now an overwhelming 1:11 favorite.

Although Labadze was hovering near his career-high ranking of 42, Führer says he had good reason to bet against his friend that day. "I saw him practice two hours before the match," Führer says. "It was too hot for him. He was sweating. I thought, He cannot beat Knowle."

On the tournament grounds, Führer went to a booth owned by Cashpoint, a betting outfit whose black-and-yellow signs are familiar on the streets of Vienna, and he placed a bet with a clerk for 10,000 euros ($11,968) on the underdog. Führer was so sure of himself he boasted that he might as well collect the money right there. He also chided a friend for considering a bet on Knowle to win in straight sets. Another Cashpoint clerk who knew about Führer's relationship with Labadze overheard him say, "Are you mental? You have to bet him to win two sets to one."

The clerk called her boss, who, knowing of Führer's penchant for betting on Labadze to lose, had instructed his employees to reject any of his wagers. Outraged to learn a bet had been accepted, the manager ordered it voided. When Führer returned to the booth following Knowle's three-set win, the clerk refused to pay out his winnings. "They talked to me like I was a criminal," Führer says. So in June 2004, Führer sued Cashpoint for his money and forced a match-fixing allegation into a courtroom for the first time in the sport's history.

"WHEN BETTING IS SO BIG," SAYS ONE EXPERT, "ANY INFORMATION ABOUT INJURIES OR PLAYER MOTIVATION IS GOLD."

Eager to prove its case, Cashpoint charged that "an attempted betting fraud" had occurred and asked the court to compel Labadze's testimony. But in early 2005, the Georgian said he had no intention of taking time away from his busy schedule. "These accusations are complete nonsense," his agent told reporters. As a last-ditch effort, Cashpoint lawyers wrote to the ATP. Did anyone there have anything that could help their case?

The request found its way to Richard Ings, then the ATP's vice president of rules and competition. Ings had recently traveled to London to ask Betfair execs for access to their vast database. He proposed that the firm alert him every time they detected a sudden shift in the odds, and he requested details to help investigate those shifts, such as when and where bets were made. Eager to stay scandal-free, Betfair pledged to cooperate.

Ings wasted no time running Führer's name through the database. Führer, it turned out, was one of Betfair's largest tennis customers. The strange thing was that so much of his action seemed to be on Labadze to lose. At the Palermo match in which Labadze was fined, Führer stacked more cash against the player than anyone else.

Ings called Labadze to ask about the relationship, but the Georgian was vague. Sure he knew the gambler, but that didn't mean they fixed matches.

Führer says Labadze phoned him the day after that conversation. "I said to him, 'Sorry, what can I do? I bet against you and won.' He said, 'Okay.'"

But Ings wasn't convinced. "We had little pieces of the puzzle," he says. "We just didn't know what they meant."

On May 24, 2005, Ings sent an email to Cashpoint's lawyer, spelling out what he'd learned. In particular, he listed five 2003 matches that contributed to the $45,000 Führer had made on Betfair by wagering against Labadze. In each of them, he wrote, "Mr. Führer took unusual positions placing bets at almost any odds on Labadze to lose." Ings cautioned that before Cashpoint's lawyers used the information in court it needed to be confirmed and approved by his bosses. "The ATP does not want to compromise its sources as our inquiries continue," he wrote.

Two months after Ings pressed the send key, he left the ATP for a higher-profile job in his native Australia as head of its new antidoping agency. But before clearing out of the ATP's Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., headquarters, Ings wrote a report that urged his colleagues to keep an eye on the Führer suit. "It is an important test case," Ings recalls writing, "the first time anyone has gone to court to challenge the relationship of a player and a gambler."

The report went to the ATP's chief executive, Mark Miles, but by September 2005 Miles was gone too. It is unclear if de Villiers, the ATP chairman, ever saw the report. (The ATP would not answer questions about the report.) The tour's general counsel, Mark Young, didn't even know Ings had written to Cashpoint until he was shown the email last month.

A Cashpoint lawyer, Martin Paar, says he tried to follow Ings' instructions to get approval from the ATP before using the explosive email about Führer in court. He says he reached out to ATP officials "three or four times." But whether by oversight or design, no one called back. "It seemed a little strange," he says. "First, we got a lot of information. Then everything stopped."

Paar asked the judge in the case to appoint someone to get the answers he couldn't. But the expert, Klaus Zotter, fared no better. In a report to the

court obtained by ESPN, Zotter wrote that he called the ATP and was "informed that, relating to my inquiries, no further information was available any longer." ATP officials insist they have no record of any approaches to their top staff. But Paar says he was left with the distinct impression that after Ings left, "there was no interest anymore in this case."

LAST AUGUST, with the Cashpoint case still pending, Nikolay Davydenko walked onto a court in Sopot, Poland. His opponent was the 87th-ranked Argentine Martin Vassallo Arguello. Davydenko won the first set easily, 6-2. Fans saw nothing unusual in Davydenko's early lead, but Betfair executives in London did. More than $7 million had been laid on the match, nearly a fifth of which came from three Russia-based customers. All of them had picked Davydenko to lose. So when he dropped the second set before withdrawing in the third with a foot injury, Betfair took the unprecedented step of voiding all bets on the match.

Young, the ATP's general counsel, insists his organization wasn't caught unawares by the incident. "It didn't wake us up from a powerful sleep," he says. "It didn't shake us into sudden activity. We've been on top of this." He blames the slow pace of the investigation on the vague nature of gambling cases. "People see the same incident six different ways," he says. "No one has hard evidence."

But by this past September, evidence seemed to be everywhere. Djokovic, the world's No. 3 player, told reporters that he'd been offered 110,000 pounds (roughly $200,000) to lose in the first round of a 2006 tournament in St. Petersburg, Russia. Although representatives for Djokovic later backed off the statement, de Villiers reacted by saying he was taking "any form of corruption extraordinarily seriously."

And yet, ATP officials appeared not to know of the Cashpoint decision made that same day until ESPN told them about it three months later. The judge had ruled it was "a well-known fact in betting office circles that there existed a close connection among [Führer] and the tennis player Labadze." But with no concrete evidence of a fix, and no further testimony from the sport's governing body, she had to find for Führer.

So on Sept. 24, with the ATP already investigating the allegations against Davydenko, the Gambling King collected his sweetest payday ever: $25,353 in winnings plus 4% interest and $13,419 in court costs.

A WORLDWIDE TELEVISION audience of more than a billion people watched Djokovic take the Australian Open on Jan. 27 with booming ground strokes and pinpoint serves. But as long as the rank-and-file build their careers in places like Sopot, Poland—and as long as gamblers know where to find them—the shadow of corruption will dog the ATP. By the time the tour passed an emergency rule last fall that required players to report suspicious contact within 48 hours, the bookmakers' secret list of questionable matches had ballooned beyond 140. "In Austria, it's a new experience to try to prove a tennis match is a fake," says Paar, Cashpoint's lawyer. "We tried everything, but in the end we lost for lack of evidence."

Watching Davydenko get dragged ever further into the gambling investigation, Führer is relieved his own case is over. "I am not a criminal," he says, sounding like the wounded victim. "Why this big story? Just because I bet one bet on a tennis match and have this luck and won?"

Führer, of course, insists the evidence that Paar seeks doesn't exist. He says he's just a hard-working guy who used every tool available to him to make a buck. Well, every tool but one: "I never spoke with Labadze about tanking a tennis match for money."

As a new season gets rolling, Führer has a hankering to get back out on the circuit. "I have many friends there," he says. But he also knows he's too high-profile to pass unnoticed. Anyway, his friends are older now. "They probably just want to drink a glass of red wine and go to bed early."

So he'll stay at Bet Paradise, hoping none of the dour-faced chain smokers at his tables have access to the kind of inside information he once did.

How big will the match-fixing scandal in tennis become? E-mail us at post@espnmag.com.

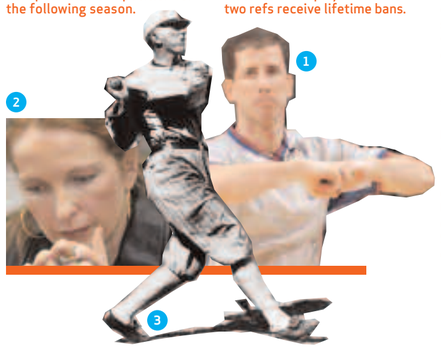
"IT DIDN'T WAKE US FROM A POWERFUL SLEEP," THE ATP LAWYER SAYS. "IT DIDN'T SHAKE US INTO SUDDEN ACTIVITY. WE'VE BEEN ON TOP OF THIS."

FIX-IT MEN

MATCH-FIXING MAY BE NEW TO TENNIS, BUT IT'S BEEN A PART OF SPORTS FOR YEARS. BY DALE BRAUNER

2007 Former NBA ref Tim Donaghy (1) pleads guilty to federal felony charges after passing inside info on games to gamblers. He also admits to betting on games, including those he worked.

2006 Italy's top soccer league is roiled by revelations of a scheme to manipulate referee assignments. The three teams involved are removed from European club competition for the following season.



2005 Italian Serie B champ Genoa is discovered to have bribed Venezia to throw the season's final match. By winning, Genoa earned a promotion to Serie A. After the scandal is discovered, it is bumped down to Serie C1.

2005 Brazilian soccer refs Edílson Pereira de Carvalho and Paulo José Danelon are caught taking bribes to fix matches; 11 matches are replayed and the two refs receive lifetime bans.

2002 Pairs skaters Elena Berezhnaya and Anton Sikharulidze win gold in Salt Lake City—until a French judge (2) confesses to being involved in a conspiracy to skew scores. She receives a three-year suspension by the International Skating Union, and the sport's scoring system is overhauled.

1997 Former Arizona State ballers Stevin Smith and Isaac Burton Jr. plead guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit sports bribery in connection with a point-shaving scheme during the 1993-94 season.

1951 Thirty-two players in seven schools, including five in New York City, engage in a point-fixing scheme; 22 players and 10 gamblers are convicted.

1921 Joe Jackson (3) and seven other White Sox are given lifetime suspensions for conspiring to fix the 1919 World Series. The players are never convicted in a court of law.

LEFT TO RIGHT: LAURENT REBOURS/AP IMAGES; NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; JOE MURPHY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES