LOVE GAME

A HISTORY OF TENNIS, FROM VICTORIAN PASTIME TO GLOBAL PHENOMENON

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The game of love

'By the time I was thirteen I was madly in love. It was a blinding, choking, loyal love, filled with devotion and dedication. Obvious to all, it was understood only by a few.'[1]

The object of Ricardo Pancho Gonzales' affection was his tennis racquet. He even took it to bed with him. A Mexican–American from a humble background, he was to have a troubled, passionate relationship with the game. The scar on his cheek gave his Latin looks a dangerous edge; he was no stereotype of the languid, white-clad player. Nor was he alone in falling in love with a game.

The placid Dan Maskell, who also came from a working-class family, but was a far different character from the fiery Mexican, started as a ball boy, and 'thus began a love affair with lawn tennis that has never faded'.[2] The British pre-war star, Fred Perry, felt the same. Indeed, in no other sport than tennis has the relationship of players and spectators, the game and its followers, been so often discussed in terms of romantic love. Even hard-bitten journalists fell for tennis. A. L. Laney, a sports writer between the wars, entitled his autobiography *Covering the Court: A Fifty Year Love Affair with the Game of Tennis*, and confessed: 'I had fallen in love with tennis and this book is the account of that love affair'. He loved the players too. The first time he saw the early American star, Little Bill Johnston, he immediately fell in love with him,

'completely and without reservation'. He had previously 'worshipped from afar' the Californian, Maurice McLoughlin, a ferocious serve-volleyer who won the United States National tournament in 1912 and 1913, when he also reached the challenge round at Wimbledon. But Laney's passion for Little Bill was different from his hero worship of McLoughlin. It was love, and 'once I had fallen, little else seemed to matter so much as seeing him again and seeing him win. Many had this same experience and the younger they were the more they were smitten.'[3] And in the twenty-first century, it was not uncommon for a manly voice to shout from the stands, 'I love you Roger,' when Federer was playing.

'Love', the word, is at the centre of tennis. It is embedded in the unique and eccentric tennis scoring system. Love meaning nothing – zero. Playing for love. That it was, uniquely, a sport in which women and men played together made it a 'love game' in a social and romantic sense. Yet the feminine element in tennis was always controversial. As was that troublesome 'love'. It was not a manly word. When a friend introduced the seventies American star, Chrissie Evert, to her future husband, the handsome British player, John 'Legs' Lloyd, she was immediately attracted. As he left, he said, 'Lovely to meet you.' Chrissie turned in dismay to her friend: 'Oh no! He's gay!'[4] Such was the association of love with effeminacy, at least in the American mind.

The love of which Laney wrote and Gonzales spoke was akin to what the ancient Greeks termed *agape*: an intense admiration and more: something spiritual and almost religious. Yet the rhythm of tennis was also erotic. The cleanly struck shots that streamed off the racquet, the ball exploding off the court and the body's leap from gravity and time – these were inspirational. The player pressed with stroke after stroke and built to the final unanswerable shot and this was repeated in game after game, climax and anti-climax building ever higher, all leading to the point of no return. For player and spectator alike the game provided no guaranteed orgasmic moment, no certainty of a win. The game

enacted an unpredictable dialectics of desire – and the spectator's desire is focused on the player.

The tennis star is subjected to intense scrutiny. Tennis matches can last for hours and during them the spectators' gaze is relentlessly trained on the player's body, movements and moods, as happens in no other sport, certainly not to the same extent. (The attention paid to footballer David Beckham is the exception rather than the rule.) This is even more the case in the age of the close-up, the replay and the slow-mo. These place the tennis player alongside the film star as an icon of glamour and beauty.

The erotic body of the player is deployed in a sport discussed in terms of artistry; the performer whose body is her instrument is considered a creative genius. Sports writer Frank Deford questioned whether a sportsperson could be an artist in the full sense of the word. A sporting performance, he thought, might be beautiful, but a great athlete was more like some natural wonder – a flower, a waterfall or a snow-capped mountain.

This is clearly wrong. To suggest that an athlete is some kind of natural phenomenon is to ignore the hard work and intense dedication that goes into the development of any outstanding performer. There is nothing 'natural' about becoming the best tennis player (or the best dancer) in the world. To an inborn gift of eye-hand coordination the player must bring the capacity to devote herself to endless repetitive practice of the same movement. To that must be added the 'feel' outstanding players have for their game. This, it has been suggested, is 'an affinity for translating thought into action'. Players 'see' the visual field in a manner differently from those less gifted and this enables them to discern subtle patterns unrecognised by others. Chess masters, artists and athletes have this special awareness. They can break down their field of operation into clusters of patterns and, often without conscious thought, translate them into movement. This is a form of creative expression in which the athlete's body is the instrument. Her split-second movements are those of an artist and may indeed display originality amounting to genius.[5]

There is the further uncertainty whether the performance arts require *creative* genius in the way that, say, composing music is said to do: whether the cellist Rostropovich – the performer who brings music to life – is a genius on the same level as Beethoven or Shostakovich, who created that music. It is problematic to rate a bodily performance by comparison with a 'work' created out of random words or sounds.

The performance of a dancer is as ephemeral as that of an athlete. The difference is that dance is, by long tradition, acknowledged as art, supported by music, narrative and *mise en scène*. The athlete lacks such supports, but, like the dancer, creates through movement. You could even argue that tennis is more creative than dance, since the dancer usually follows choreography designed in advance, whereas the tennis player must always improvise.

Tennis appears to be closer to dance than to any other performance form (with the possible exception of figure skating). The great 1920s champion Bill Tilden excelled at dancing and skating and on court his movement was astonishingly graceful. His fleet-footedness was legendary: the Spanish player Manuel Alonso thought it was like seeing Nijinsky dance across the stage. He perfected the art of taking a little half-step just before he turned, enabling him to make a perfect stroke with perfect spin.

Tilden himself certainly believed he was an artist. He quoted his friend, the opera singer Mary Garden, as providing him with the concept of athlete as artist. 'You're a tennis artist and artists always know better than anyone else when they're right. If you believe in a certain way to play, you play that way no matter what anyone else tells you. Once you lose faith in your own artistic judgement, you're lost. Win or lose, right or wrong, be true to your art.'[6]

Helen Wills Moody, eight times Wimbledon champion, agreed that tennis was 'in its way an art. Tennis encourages the player to express himself and his personality,' she wrote. 'Into his game he puts something of his personality so that his play becomes a unique expression.'[7]

Gianni Clerici, the Italian historian of tennis, endorsed this view: 'I had always thought of tennis, from the very moment of my childhood when I chose it as my game, as something different. I sensed that there was another way of looking at the sport: as a work of art.'[8]

Tennis, art or not, is unquestionably a sport, if sport is defined as a competitive game involving physical exertion. It is the tension between art and sport that makes it so special, but, unique as it is, tennis has always existed and evolved within the wider culture of sport. Sport has played a central and increasing role in international culture from the mid-nineteenth century onward, until in today's globalised world it dominates. It offers the panaceas religion was once thought to provide. It combines spectacle and warfare, nationalism and obsession, passion without consequences.

Tennis, while seeming to summon just such allegiances and devotions, has never quite fitted into this picture. The Victorian game was invented by sportsmen who were also sports writers, but it was played at garden parties. Its social elaboration does not sit easily with the common idea of sport. In particular, it challenges the sporting ethos. The tennis match may seem at one level like a duel or a fight, but it is also a dance, with its own elaborate courtesies, and its rhythm of pauses, etiquette and protocol; and it takes place within the wider ritual of the tournament, an expansive social environment distinct from the football stadium or boxing ring. In this, it is closer to an opera or music festival than a sport – going to Wimbledon is more like a day at the opera at Glyndebourne than an afternoon of football at the Emirates stadium.

Those in charge of tennis have, however, especially since the Second World War, endeavoured to fit it ever more closely into the pattern of other sports. Tennis was, and is, less dangerous than some sports: boxing, say, motor racing, cycling and skiing. Nor is it a contact sport. But the sport's promoters have increasingly emphasised physical exertion and the pugilistic aspects of the game, rather than elegance and beauty.

This has been within a world in which the sporting ethos is so dominant and so little challenged that the attempt to locate tennis at least partly outside it may seem eccentric or downright perverse, but this is necessary if the eccentricity and richness of the game itself is to be fully understood. The contemporary conventional sporting perspective is itself a kind of tunnel vision; a more expansive, cultural viewpoint may provide a better appreciation of the 'game of love'.

To approach tennis with 'love' may be dangerous if, as Oscar Wilde wrote, 'each man kills the thing he loves' – whether because that love is too obsessive or too critical. Many critics, as we shall see, believed that 'love' in tennis was dangerous – that the very fact of this word being used in the scoring system rendered it unmanly. But love is also a hopeful word, a word of celebration; and in the end, the point of writing about tennis is to celebrate the beauty, the glamour and the joy of this unique game.

PART ONE

A LEISURED CLASS

2

Healthy excitement and scientific play

IN MARCH 1874 THE LONDON *Court Journal* reported news of a new game, likely to replace the croquet of which everyone had tired. 'Sphairistike or lawn tennis' was just the thing for those in search of 'novelty', and, continued the report, 'it has been tested at several country houses, and has been found full of healthy excitement, besides being capable of much scientific play'. The game was for sale as a box set, 'not much larger than a double gun case' and 'contained bats and balls and a portable court'. Thus was the birth of lawn tennis announced to a public ready to fall for the charms of a game that, from its birth combined thrills, social cachet and commercial possibilities.

A confident upper class and an expanding bourgeoisie with money and leisure to spare were refashioning social, cultural and educational life in the 1870s. Britain had just passed the apex of its industrial if not imperial power, but was still the wealthiest country in the world. The stifling grip of the evangelical Victorian Sunday was weakening. Aspiring urban artisans and white-collar workers were beginning to have a little leisure and a little money to spend. Various publics from different social groups and classes demanded new forms of entertainment to replace the old rural folk traditions – or in some cases to reconstruct them along

modern lines. Sport, whether played or watched, was one among a number of pleasurable entertainments offered to the growing town-dwelling public. Venues new and old, such as the Lyceum and the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, not to mention the music halls and eventually the cinemas, brought all sorts of novel shows and spectacles to this public, ranging from spiritualist séances to the conjuring tricks of Maskelyne and Devant.

Lawn tennis seemed designed, as was hinted by the words 'country houses', for an elegant and exclusive section of society. It quickly became fashionable and it provided an alluring social occasion. It was the new version of an ancient game, a game so old that no one knew how it got its name of 'tennis'. Popular in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it had lost favour by the eighteenth century, but with the growth and reorganisation of sports in the Victorian period was revived in a form distinct enough to be classed as new. It was at first viewed as a pastime or craze rather than a sport, displacing other games played on social occasions rather than as competitive events.

Croquet, for example, provided an opportunity for upper- and upper-middle-class society to get a little open-air exercise in an environment in which men and women mingled. But, as Lieutenant Colonel Osborn, an early devotee of tennis, wrote in 1881, croquet had become 'a tyranny', because it vested all power in the captain of each team, his 'subordinates' having 'no volition of their own … compelled to [play] exclusively to suit [his] convenience'. By the 1870s an open-air version of badminton, originally introduced from India, was replacing croquet, but the shuttlecock proved uncontrollable in even the slightest breeze. Another craze was 'rinking' – roller skating on indoor asphalt courts to the accompaniment of band music. This, Colonel Osborn said, was boring and monotonous and often led to falls and injuries. Yet for a while people were 'quite demented' with it.

Histories of sport have usually classified lawn tennis retrospectively as yet another new sport of the later Victorian period. To link it, as Osborn did, with these other 'crazes' places it more

accurately as a hybrid that bridged the sporting culture then developing and the burgeoning world of entertainment in the rapidly expanding cities. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in France, theatrical performances had often been held on tennis courts, and there is a connection between tennis and theatre too often unrecognised.[1]

Osborn felt that lawn tennis, unlike croquet and rinking, was likely to endure. It was more versatile and more exciting. Above all, it provided an idyllic social occasion:

> The scene should be laid on a well kept garden lawn. There should be a bright warm sun overhead … Near at hand, under the cool shadow of a tree, there should be strawberries and cream, iced claret mug, and a few spectators, who do not want to play but are lovers of the game …[2]

Lawn tennis was never to equal the popularity of cricket and football. Yet it represents more accurately than any other spectacle the hugely significant changes in society at the moment of its birth. Tennis was perfectly fitted to captivate the increasingly secular world of the late nineteenth century.

Not least, lawn tennis differed from the other sports so rapidly developing in that period because, uniquely, men and women shared the pitch, playing in partnerships usually of two on each side of the net. It arose as the suffrage movement, underway since the 1850s, was widening its demands to include education as well as the vote and property rights, and generally a greater public role and a widening of opportunities for women. The playing of sport was to the fore as girls' schools and university colleges were founded. Advances in medical science were leading to a changed view of the importance of exercise for bodily (and indeed spiritual) health for women as well as men; dress reform societies waged war against restrictive female fashions.

There was a corresponding relaxation in the irksome taboos restricting social intercourse between men and women. Chaperones and corsets were still the order of the day, but the very

growth of a consumer society dedicated to commercial entertainment acted to dissolve ancient prejudices that were often embedded in religious dogma.

Tennis was destined to flourish in the novel space of the suburban garden lawn, which was a 'tamed' version of the countryside just as the new sporting culture was a tamed version of previously rough and unregulated activities. In the 1860s Major T. H. Gem and Mr J. B. Perera had marked out an Edgbaston lawn as a tennis court and in 1872 the first lawn tennis club was founded at nearby Leamington Manor House Hotel.

These developments anticipated 'sphairistike' (the classical Greek name was soon abandoned) and its patenter, Major Copton Wingfield. Descended from an ancient landed family that had fallen into decline and relative poverty, Wingfield hoped the boxed lawn tennis set would revive his fortunes and used his aristocratic connections to publicise it in society magazines such as the *Court Journal* and *Vanity Fair*. *The Field*, bible of the English gentleman at home and abroad, became interested and within a few months lawn tennis was launched as the latest fashionable craze.

Wingfield's claim to be the inventor of lawn tennis, calling his boxed set 'The Major's Game of Tennis', likewise his tale of its invention at a country house party in Wales in December 1873, lending it social cachet, were more than a little shaky. Nor did he ever benefit financially from his initiative as he seems to have hoped. Assailed with family problems – the early deaths of his three sons and the chronic mental illness of his wife – he did not renew his patent. Nevertheless, it is significant that it was a *commercial* venture, and so anticipated the marketing of tennis, as of all sports.

In 1868 the All England Croquet Club had been founded at the offices of *The Field* magazine. J. H. Walsh, editor of *The Field* and Henry Jones, a regular contributor, were journalists as well as sportsmen (Jones was also a doctor), and sports journalism from the beginning shaped the public perception of lawn tennis – and indeed, amplified the importance and popularity of all sports.