

A Brief Look at Tennis

By Baron Hrolf Herjolfssen

“When we have match’d our rackets to these balls,
We will, in France, by God’s grace, play a set
Shall strike his father’s crown into the hazard.
Tell him he hath made a match with such a wrangler
That all the courts of France will be disturb’d
With chases.” Henry V, Act I, Scene II

These are the words Shakespeare places in the mouth of Henry V in reply to a mocking gift of tennis balls by the French Prince. Whilst it is believed that he did play the game, I have not been able to find any proof either way. It is certainly a game that was developed contemporaneously with his reign for tennis, to an anachronist, should not mean the game played at Wimbledon or in the Davis Cup. What they play there is not tennis (although it is derived from it). The sloppiness of our modern times leads us to not use the full name of the modern game, which is either lawn tennis or hard-court tennis. Real tennis is played in a room, which looks like a cross between a cloister and a blackwashed barn. Shakespeare almost certainly included the above reference, as it would be one readily understood by his audiences.

Tennis is a game that can trace its descent to the handball games of the Greeks and Romans and is alleged to have matured in the monasteries. Although we have a brief description of the rules in a Latin grammar of 1535, the first full set of rules that we have available comes from only 1599 and is still the basic form that is used today. It was first seen in roughly its current form in the streets and chateaux of France as early as the thirteenth century and shows its origins as a street game with the projecting roofs and odd angles of a court, which emulate the irregular projections of a streetscape. In France it was originally known as ‘Jeu de Paume’, changing its name to ‘Le Jeu de Courte Palme’ when enclosed courts were built to play the game in. This had occurred by 1356, although often the hand (covered with a thick leather glove) was still used to hit the ball. Roughly at the same time (around 1370), Chaucer wrote in a line Troilus and Cressida: “canstow playen racket to and fro”. This indicates that the ball was being hit by a racket, rather than by hand, by this time. This does not imply an English origin for this innovation as the word ‘racket’ clearly derives from the French word ‘raquette’. This is defined by an old French dictionary as ‘a tool used for the palm game’. It derives from the Italian word ‘racchetta’ or ‘retichetta’, itself derived from ‘rete’, which means ‘net’. This shows a possible Italian influence in the adoption of the racket.

Of the many ball games to see their origins in the middle ages, it was regarded as the only one suitable for a gentleman to play. Indeed, it was perhaps the most popular game at the courts of Henry VII and VIII. The latter built the famous court at Hampden Palace, re-modelled as it is today by Charles I in 1625. It was a game that was widespread across Europe, with most major towns in France having a court and at least one of the Kings of Hungary (King Matthias Corvinus) being a dedicated player.

The ball was originally made of white leather stuffed with dog hair. Although each court often uses differently made balls, including cork covered in felt and cloth, this has generally changed to a ball made of strips of felt wound around, hammered into shape, tied with string and covered with ‘Melton’ cloth (a woollen fabric). These latter balls have a core that can last (with re-tying and covering) up to seventy years. They are quite hard and bounce like a ‘dead’ squash ball. Players wore the dress of the day, with an emphasis on, for males, tights and short tunics. On their feet they wore felt slippers.

Each court varies in size, although they are generally around 30 metres long by 10 metres wide (90 by 30 feet). The ratio of 3:1 is always maintained. A net droops loosely across the centre and the floor has a number of lines on it with numbers painted on the wall. The way the ball lands near these lines dictates play and scoring. Each court has a net-fronted gallery for spectators with a sloping roof running along the side and another at one end. The other (or hazard) end has a closed section with a sloping roof, some odd angled sections (the tambour) and a small ‘target’ area (the hazard). This often has a painting of a monk’s head on it. The court is generally 9 to 15 metres high, as hitting the roof is a fault. Lighting was provided to the court by high windows and chandeliers (both reasons for discouraging shots that are too high)

Incidentally, the shape of the court had a large impact upon the development of theatre in France, as it was one of the few large enclosed spaces in most towns. This meant that theatres moved away from the semi-circular layout of the Mediterranean towards a rectangular shape. This shape was imported to England after the Restoration.

The winner of a match is the player (or players in a doubles game) who wins two out of three or three out of five sets. Each set is played as the first to eight games. Scoring runs the same as its cheaper derivative of lawn tennis, although the achievement of each point is more complex (and I am not going to try and explain it here). Like volleyball, which has a derivation from the same roots, points can be scored only by the serving player(s). Servers must hit the roof of the gallery (called the penthouse) before the ball lands on the floor. The game is fast and a far more tactical than lawn tennis with a greater requirement to think about shots.

Tennis is played today in several countries and is undergoing a bit of a revival with new courts being built and old ones (such as in St Petersburg) being reconditioned. In Ynys Fawr we play the game each year on the local court, in full garb. This is generally done towards the end of the year. I would encourage everyone to try and see (and preferably play) this marvellous period game.

Bibliography

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