SPORT

TENNIS ON THE GREEN

The game is still best when played as it was originally: on grass

BY MARSHALL JON FISHER

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Last July, at the grass-court Hall of Fame Championships, in Newport, Rhode Island, I watched Kenneth Carlsen, a towering, blond-ponytailed Dane, approach the net behind a backhand sidespin shot. The ball launched off his racket, spinning furiously at an oblique angle, and bounced low near the baseline. Carlsen's opponent, the compact South African Neville Godwin, could only look on helplessly as the ball skidded past him.

This took me back—it seemed years since I'd seen a sidespin approach shot. When I learned tennis, in the early 1970s, pros and amateurs alike knew that the proper way to get to the net was behind a slice, which produces backspin, causing the ball to bounce low and making a passing shot more difficult. The more advanced technique of sidespin was even better, because the ball would not only stay low but also angle away from the opponent. Today's pros, mostly "power baseliners," tend to approach the net, if at all, behind topspin shots—a strategy considered misguided as recently as twenty years ago. They assume, correctly, that the potency of topspin on a hard or clay court, along with the sheer force exerted by modern players with modern rackets, is likely to set up an easy volley, if it doesn't win the point outright. But on grass, where the ball stays low and topspin is dampened, a slice or a sidespin is still the best way to get to the net. Carlsen relearned this maxim on the next point, when he apparently forgot what the playing surface was and came to the net on a topspin forehand; the ball bounced comfortably up to Godwin, who dispatched it down the line.

The Hall of Fame Championships reminded me why I much prefer grass courts, both as spectator and as player, to hard or clay courts. Because they cause the ball to bounce low, fast, and erratically, grass courts encourage a greater emphasis on net play—in which the ball is hit before it bounces—and thus make for a more diversified game. Instead of simply blasting the ball back and forth from the baseline, players must strive to get to the net themselves and to keep their opponents away from it. The result, unlike the action typically seen on other surfaces, is a smorgasbord of ground strokes, approach shots, lobs, and retrievals, with a variety of spins and angles.

The Hall of Fame tournament, held each July at the historic Newport Casino, home to the International Tennis Hall of Fame, is a wonderful opportunity to glimpse this version of the game. Of course, even grass-court tennis today is a far cry from the game as it was played before big rackets came into use, in the 1980s. The players are too big and strong, the rackets too powerful, for the old rhythm of chip, lob, and retrieve ever to return.

Nonetheless, in the quaint confines of the Casino spectators get a feeling for the history of the game. At one point in the Carlsen-Godwin match a ripple of laughter in the crowd caused Carlsen to halt his service motion. He turned to see a rabbit grazing in the grass behind the baseline. A few linesmen and ball boys tried to corner the interloper and finally settled for chasing it under the bandstand. For a moment one could imagine it was 1901, not 2001.

In 1874 Mary Ewing Outerbridge, a Staten Island socialite, was vacationing in Bermuda when she saw some Englishmen knocking a white ball around an hourglass-shaped court on a lawn. A British army officer, Major Walter Wingfield, had invented *sphairistiké* (Greek for "playing at ball") the previous year, adapting it from court tennis (a more complex, indoor game that dates back to the Middle Ages) and "squash rackets." Outerbridge may or may not have been the first, but she brought some equipment for "lawn tennis" (as most people were calling it) back home, and soon

INTERNATIONAL TENNIS HALL OF FAME

members of the American leisure class were whacking balls around mansion grounds and in places like the Staten Island Cricket and Baseball Club.

In 1881 the United States National Lawn Tennis Association (a name later shortened to the United States Lawn Tennis Association) was formed to standardize rules and equipment, and the first U.S. singles championship for men was held at the brand-new Newport Casino. The club hosted the tournament until 1915, when play was moved to the West Side Tennis Club, in Forest Hills, New York. The women's championship, which began in 1887 at the Philadelphia Cricket Club, was moved to Forest Hills in 1921. In 1968, when all the major tournaments worldwide began to allow professionals to play, the combined U.S. championships became the U.S. Open.

As recently as 1974 three of the four major championships in the world were played on grass, and in the United States an entire grass-court season led up to the U.S. Open. But a tennis craze in the early 1970s brought the game to the masses, and from then on, grass-court tennis seemed less and less representative of the popular game. Only expensive country clubs could afford to build and maintain grass courts. The USLTA dropped its grassy *L* and switched the U.S. Open to clay courts at Forest Hills in 1975 and then to the hard courts of the National Tennis Center, in Queens, in 1978.

Now Wimbledon is the only important grass-court tournament. And although it remains probably the most prestigious tournament in the world, and is certainly my favorite to watch, it often seems even to me to be a quirky anachronism. Few of the players are comfortable on the grass, and frequently some one-dimensional monster server, such as last year's unseeded champion, Goran Ivanisevic, goes much further than he has any right to. More well-rounded serve-and-volleyers excel at Wimbledon too, but they are almost extinct. Pete Sampras may turn out to be the last great serve-and-volleyer in history. Jana Novotna, the last woman to serve and volley consistently, retired a couple of years ago.

Wimbledon gamely continues to carry the grass-court torch and shows no sign yet of caving in and moving to a different surface, but one wonders how long it can hold out. The forces of global business, and the calls for bigger, more modern venues, are strong. At last year's U.S. Open, I couldn't help feeling that tennis had become too big for its own good. The new main stadium at the National Tennis Center is cavernous, and rock music blared between matches, along with announcements like "On behalf of Heineken, the official beer of the U.S. Open, enjoy the matches!" Such sponsorship certainly isn't helping the common fan. If you don't have the connections to get into one of the corporate boxes, you pay $40 per ticket to sit in the upper-tier seats, appropriately painted sky-blue, and watch two tiny figures below knock a yellow blip back and forth. Better, for my money, to go to Newport, pay $20, and sit close enough—in any seat—to appreciate the dimensions of a tennis court and how expertly the pros inhabit them.

The Newport Casino was the architect Stanford White's first major work, and today it offers visitors one of the world's finest examples of Victorian shingle-style architecture. Besides the grass courts, the Casino is home to the Newport Casino Croquet Club and also to America's second-oldest court-tennis court, still in use today. On a weekend you can usually find a few court-tennis devotees wielding archaic oblong-headed wooden rackets, knocking soft balls around an indoor court with a red cement floor.

In the main building is the International Tennis Hall of Fame & Museum, the best tennis museum in the world. You can find a nineteenth-century box holding a net, stakes, and rackets for "the new game of Lawn Tennis." Rackets from as far back as 1880 (including a 1925 metal racket with a wooden handle), a can of 1920s Wright & Ditson balls, and spiked tennis shoes (pros used spikes on grass until the early 1970s) are all there, along with videotapes of historic matches, shown on a 1950s Majestic television.

The Casino also offers the only public grass courts in the United States. For $25 per person—less than the average golf-green fee—anyone can experience the pleasures of grass-court tennis. Between semifinals at last year's tournament I played on a side court with a friend. Other than my daily summertime matches with my four-year-old son, in which we take our wooden rackets out onto "our grass court" (a lumpy, mole-aerated patch of American yard), I hadn't played on grass in six years. It had been too long.

The first thing to strike you is the feel underfoot. Almost any sport is most enjoyable played outdoors on a field. A grass tennis court, which is very much like a putting green, is the ultimate field; there's a thrill just to stepping onto the surface. The softness actually seems to heal aching knees and ankles. Once you begin to hit, the effect of grass on a bouncing tennis ball resurrects strategies and patterns of play from the past. Because the ball bounces low and fast, you need to meet it as soon after the bounce as possible. Better yet, get to the net and stay there: you won't have to worry about inconsistent and skidding bounces. The chipped approach, the underspin lob, and the serve-and-volley game will serve you better than topspin. On the court next to us four elderly gentlemen were playing doubles, undeterred by knees that probably wouldn't endure much hard-court play; they served and volleyed on every point to great effect. Maybe it's just that my game was always best suited for a vanishing surface I could never afford to play on. But there is an aesthetic satisfaction to playing tennis on turf that any tennis player might feel. (As a private pilot, I get a similar rush from landing on grass runways. The first time I did it, I turned to my instructor and crowed, "It's like playing at Forest Hills!")

I realize that grass-court tennis will never make a comeback—indeed, that it will eventually disappear from the pro circuit. And of course I approve of tennis's transformation [redacted] from an upper-class diversion to an inclusive public sport. If tennis were still a game for mansions and exclusive country clubs, I'd be playing racketball. Yet there is occasion to admit that, as with all progress, something has been lost. For the tennis connoisseur, there's nothing like hitting a few out on the lawn.