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Anyone for Sphairistike?

by Dónal Thompson



The bright young hope of Spanish tennis

In 1868 the All England Croquet Club was founded off Worple Road in the London neighbourhood of Wimbledon. Then, in 1875, Major Walter Clapton Wingfield introduced a game he had invented and named 'Sphairistike' or 'lawn¹ tennis'.

The game became immediately popular and the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club was born. To celebrate the name change the club organised the first Lawn Tennis Championships in 1877.

Twenty-two (all men) competed and the final was played in front of 200 spectators on a lawn in the centre of the club grounds. The name "Centre Court" is still used for

Wimbledon's principal court even though, in the club's current site, it is not in the centre.

Women competed in 1884 - the same year doubles were introduced- and very soon the Wimbledon championship was a major international sporting event.

The history of Wimbledon is full of legend. A peculiar champion was Rene Lacoste - yes, that's right, the man who later put the crocodile in your wardrobe. From the sublime to the ridiculous, you might say.

True to their sporting tradition the British have embraced mediocrity and Americans such as Jimmy Connors, John McEnroe and Billy Jean King have all had their golden eras in the leafy London suburb.

Spain has only won the Men's Singles final once. That was in 1966 when Señor Santana beat the North American Ralston 6-4, 11-9, 6-4. But maybe this year Rafa Nadal may prove to be the boy wonder of Wimbledon.

A curious thing about tennis is the use of the word 'love'. You will be hearing it if you are watching Wimbledon this year. When you play for nothing, for no money, you play for the love of the sport. So, nothing and love can mean the same thing. It's a very British play on words. Almost a joke. Almost.

In 1968 the Men's Champion received £2000. This year the prize money is £630,000. That's 950,000 €. Not bad for two week's work. The game has come a long way.

The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon is the spiritual home of tennis. No national anthems are sung, no flags are hoisted. There is no jingoism or yobbishness from the spectators.

It's just a game on a summer's afternoon.

¹ A lawn is area of ground covered with short grass.