

a look back in time

1968: The Tennis Revolution

Marking the birth of the "Open" era and giving rise to the professionalism and huge prize purses of today, 1968 is perhaps the most important year in the history of the game.

By Stephen Murphy

It was the swinging sixties and the world was in transition. We were screaming to The Beatles, protesting over the Vietnam War, getting hooked on TV and flying to the moon. In the tennis world, not just change but revolution was in the air. The contradiction between 'amateur' and 'professional' was about to reach crisis point.

Since the 1920s, male-dominated professional tennis had been a sideshow to the main event, and the main event was amateur. The best proved their worth in the amateur championships and Davis Cup, then in a time-honored ritual, "turned pro". For a decent income, and the chance to compete against the best, they picked up their racquets and walked away from the traditional game.

Like performing troupes they went off to play privately promoted tours in all kinds of weird and wonderful venues, with American entrepreneurs like Jack Kramer running the show. Formed near the end of the amateur era were outfits like the National Tennis League and World Championship Tennis. They got their players to wear crazy colored clothing. WCT even dubbed its stars "The Handsome Eight".

Two of those handsome eight were our own John Newcombe and Tony Roche. For Newk, when opportunity knocked at the door in 1967 there wasn't much to think about. Just before the US Championships, Roche phoned him to say that two guys with a bagful of money wanted to meet them. When Newcombe contemplated the paltry \$15,000 he would make for the year as the world's No. 1 amateur, his only question was, "When?"

Roy Emerson, winner of six Australian (amateur) singles titles, described his dilemma thus: "It was a tough decision to make because, unlike today's stars, there was this problem about making money. Getting a 10-pound voucher for winning Wimbledon didn't actually feed the family, and obviously I listened to what the pros had to offer."

The main event may have been amateur, but it was not strictly amateur, and therein lay the problem. Substantial "under the counter" payments were occurring. During the Wimbledon fortnight in 1967 a London newspaper exposed the players' tea room as an open market of bartering for appearances. To many, the hypocrisy was intolerable and rendered the amateur game a sham. "Shamateur", they called it.

It was a shocking predicament no doubt, but as Bob Dylan reminded us, the times were a'changing. New technologies were appearing (including, also in 1967, the first popular metal tennis racquet), television had discovered tennis, commercialism was on the rise, and a new generation of fans with both leisure time and money to spend was emerging. The top players wanted to play, but they also wanted to eat, and eat well.

Ninety years before, the All England Club had staged the first ever tennis tournament for "all comers". Now, it was the British LTA chief Herman David who declared the revolution. The



Rod Laver returned to the All England Club after a five year absence to win the first "Open" Wimbledon in 1968.

International Lawn Tennis Federation still refused to embrace professionalism. So in December 1967 the LTA voted to break all the rules and make British tournaments in 1968, including Wimbledon, "open".

It was a watershed moment in the history of tennis. In February the USLTA, despite some division, voted in favour of open tennis. Weeks later, on 30 March, the ILTF held an emergency meeting. By the time it ended, twelve open tournaments had been scheduled for 1968. (Australia had been prepared to accept open tennis, but not at the cost of parting ways with the ILTF.)

The very first tournament of the modern era was the \$14,000 British Hard Court Championships in Bournemouth, held in April. In this 32-strong event, Ken Rosewall upset Rod Laver in the final to collect the first "open" winner's cheque of \$2400. Such was the controversy surrounding the whole issue of professionalism, Virginia Wade, the women's champion, declined the first prize in case the open experiment fell in a heap and she was banned. In true amateur tradition Wade accepted \$120 for expenses.

At the first French Open, "Muscles" repeated the dose against Laver and Nancy Richey won the women's. Then at the first open Wimbledon, "Rocket" returned to centre court after a five-year absence to demolish Roche, while Billie Jean Moffitt-King took out the women's. The final inaugural open Grand Slam for 1968 was the US Open at Forest Hills, boasting a revolutionary \$100,000 purse. Arthur Ashe and Margaret Court were crowned champions. The very first Australian Open, worth a more modest \$30,000, was held in January 1969 in Brisbane. Laver and Court triumphed.

The revolution which ushered in open tennis was anything but clean. In the short term anachronisms remained, such as different categories of professional player, competing circuits, and Davis Cup, which remained barred to pros until 1973. But a new era had dawned. And the tennis revolution would soon be followed by an explosion. ●

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