

# Radley College Tennis Court

10 May 2020

'Half a Yard' - The Club Newsletter

## Seven Weeks of Shutdown

The lights on the RCTC court were turned off on 22 March and have stayed off. This feels, and is, a very long time ago. This newsletter has been delayed until the Prime Minister's much-anticipated announcement this evening, Sunday 10 May, in the hope that there would be positive news to convey to our members.

It was confirmed by Boris Johnson that the easing of restrictions will be gradual and conditional. While we do not have perfect clarity on the detail, it seems that more exercise will be permitted each day and that, with effect from Wednesday 13 May, playing sport with members of one's own family will be allowed.

Quite what this means, what sorts of sports will be approved, and where they will be allowed to be played, should become clearer over the next few days.

As a clearer picture emerges, we will work through the implication of these and other changes for the real tennis club and our members.

However, and this is the key point, the changes that might make playing real tennis on the Radley court possible will be entirely dependent upon the interpretations and decisions made by Radley College. These will necessarily be affected by a host of factors unrelated to real tennis.

Even if it might seem possible for individual tennis practice to re-commence and for family members to play with each other, we will need to be guided by the school on what they will allow to happen.

As soon as we have guidance from of the College and know whether there can be any change to the current situation, we will let everyone know immediately.

**In summary, we can give no date for the re-opening of the court yet but rest assured; we will let you know as soon as the College will allow us to welcome you back.**

Until that glorious day, we will continue to bring you news about the tennis club and its members, bits and pieces from the wider world of the game and a bit of tennis-related entertainment.



With acknowledgement and apology to artist John Hassell and to the town of Skegness for appropriating this fabulous poster of 1908, which conveys so well the celebration of simple freedoms.

## Radley College Tennis Court

### Chasing the Courts – The Challenge

Since 28 March, CJR, Maggie and a determined and energetic group of Radley and Oxford members have continued their virtual quest to play on all the courts that remain open in the world and, along the way, have been finding out about many of the courts built since 1860 that are no longer in use, having burned down, fallen down, been taken down, re-purposed in a variety of ways or just left to lie empty.

In the most recent Newsletter, we told you that the team completed its tour of all the UK, French and Irish courts and had even visited the site of the proposed court in Holland, at the Houtrust lawn tennis club in The Hague.

Excitement was high as the team assembled at Dublin airport for the flight to Charleston and the start of the US leg of our tour of all the tennis courts in the world.

What sort of plane had the Real Tennis Aviation Company (trading as 'Rackety Airways') been able to get for us? Would it be a moth-balled Concorde, a redundant Dream-liner or something more along the lines of a billionaire's private jet? We knew it would be called 'The Game of Kings', but that was all.

What greeted us for the journey from Dublin to Charleston was this:



This specially scheduled plane was not, as you might imagine, the last word in comfort, but gave opportunities for socially-distanced and Covid-19 restriction-compliant, open-air tennis play on the journey.

Tomorrow we will reach Chicago, the world's most westerly court and the final one in our tour of the USA's courts in play. By getting there, the team has travelled 14.5 million metres during the overseas phase of its journey. This has been achieved using distance accumulated by members of the team, as they walk, run, cycle and row, whether in reality or indoors on a machine.

It is all about teamwork and not individual performance, which is just as well since Ed Hoskin (a former semi-pro cyclist) joined the side. He has been putting in awe-inspiring shifts day after day in a way that, if it were a competition, would be enough to make most of the rest of us decide we should just pack up and go home. However, in this format, we are grateful to him for taking considerable pressure off the rest of us.

### A Bit of Tennis History -

Maggie has continued to produce a daily update on the previous day's exertions, which has included a lot of stats, a fair number of photos, a good deal of history and more than a sprinkling of tennis lore and legend. All sorts of interesting facts have emerged: from the seedy gambling history of the game to the lavish private courts built by the Robber Barons in 19C America; from play by reigning monarchs and kings-in-waiting to the dynasties of professionals and the part that luck seems to have played in some careers.

An example of the latter is Tom Pettitt. He was a 16-year-old, penniless, newly-arrived immigrant to the US from England, when he was employed as Under-Marker to Ted Hunt at the tennis club in Boston when it opened in 1876.

Six months later, he beat Hunt in the first tournament held on that court, which was all the more remarkable because, unlike most of the professionals of his day, none of Pettitt's family had played the game, nor had he before starting work at Boston.

Tom had virtually no coaching and little competition, and, as a result, developed an idiosyncratic style of play, which was highly unconventional for the time, causing considerable comment, and not a little consternation, when he made a visit to England to play tennis in 1883, being the first player from America to do so. He did not cut the ball or use the floor to much extent. Instead, his game was based on hitting the ball, as he said; 'and hitting it d---ed hard'.

It just wasn't 'cricket', commented those Englishmen who saw him play, but they had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that it was effective, as Pettit won eight games out of every ten and almost every match he played. In 1885, when he visited England again, he successfully challenged Englishman George Lambert for the World Championship. At this point, in reports in *The Field* magazine, he was claimed as being still being English really rather than the American he had become.

Pettit's was very fit and very strong and his signature shot seems to have been a boasted force off the main wall into the dedans, but he was also a consistent retriever and an excellent match player. Thanks to John Shneerson's *Tennis Today and Yesterday*, Ronaldson Publications, 2015, for the detail above).

One of the most evocative photos that has found its way into one of these daily Chasing the Courts Challenge reports is contemporary to Pettit's World Championship Challenge and is reproduced below.



This wonderful photo of the Tennis Court in James Street was taken in 1886 by Henry Dixon and is in the collection of The Royal Academy.

### **Another Great Past Champion of the Game -**

During these special 'Shutdown' editions of the club newsletter, CJR is writing various pieces about the game and is part-way through a series about five of the greatest players. It is a happy coincidence that each of them is from a different tennis-playing nation and for this edition, he has chosen to feature Jay Gould. Chris writes:

*'My third contender for the mantle of greatest player of all time is the most contentious of them all, for his star shone but briefly at the pinnacle of the game. Jay Gould was the grandson of the American railroad magnate of the same name and was taught to play tennis and rackets from the age of twelve. His father spared no expense in building his own courts on the family estate, Georgian Court in Lakewood, New Jersey; and employed the best professionals to act as tutors.*

*Young Jay Gould learned quickly, won the US Amateur at the age of 18 and did not lose a set in that event for the next twenty years. He travelled to Europe for three years and, by winning the British Amateur in 1907 and 1908, established himself as the best amateur player in the world. In the latter year, he also became the first and only winner of an Olympic Gold Medal for real tennis, or jeu de paume as it was called to distinguish it from the new game of 'lawn tennis'.*

*During this decade, the World Championship was being contested by a quintet of gifted European professionals: Peter Latham (covered in the last newsletter), 'Punch' Fairs, Ferdinand Garcin, Ted Johnson and Fred Covey, with the latter emerging as champion in 1912. By this time Gould, now aged 24, had developed his railroad and his severe cut game and felt ready for a shot at the title.*

*Ordinarily, this would have entailed another trip to Britain, to challenge Covey at Prince's Club in Brighton or London, but Gould's wealth was such that he was able to induce Covey to play in Philadelphia with the proviso that, should the American triumph, he would play a return match in*

Britain within two years. And triumph Gould did in 1914, by the convincing margin of 7 sets to 1, thereby becoming the first amateur player to win the World Championship.



*Jay Gould in his prime, pictured in his own Georgian Court, Lakewood, New Jersey*

Gould's game was built around the best railroad ever seen at that time, a heavy cut stroke and amazing speed and agility around the court. He won the first eleven games of the 1914 challenge match and was never in danger. The defeated Covey was quoted as saying, "I think Mr Gould is the greatest tennis player the world has ever seen." This from a man who had traded blows with Peter Latham and 'Punch' Fairs.

As things turned out, a World War broke out a few months later, making an Atlantic crossing extremely hazardous, so in March 1916, a month after the start of the Battle of Verdun, Jay Gould wrote, most honourably, to Fred Covey relinquishing the title to him as he would not be able to fulfil the contract they had made. Gould (L) and Covey (R) below:



Gould never attempted to regain the title and although he continued to win the US Amateur until 1925, the fine pre-war athlete put on an enormous amount of weight, became unhealthy and died aged only 46.

So, was he the best player ever? Possibly. He destroyed Covey, who was at the peak of his game and who would be champion for twelve more years from 1916, and he did so aged just 25. Who knows what might have happened if he had not had to deal with the Great War, if there had been more competition and if he had not run to fat?



*Jay Gould, past his prime, but still US Amateur Champion, pictured with Jock Soutar (left), Professional at the Racquet Club of Philadelphia, the World Champion of Rackets and American Champion of Squash.*

Once again, I am indebted to Kathryn McNicoll for her authoritative work on the World Champions: The First and the Foremost (Ronaldson, 2010).'

## Tennis on the Internet –

### Camden Riviere

Camden Riviere continues with his YouTube videos, 'Cam's Coronavirus Catch-ups', in which he speaks to various Pros.

These conversations, and some of his other playing-tip videos, can be viewed on YouTube.

There is one about warming-up before playing that is excellent advice at any time but, after a long lay-off from the game, it is vital. Coming back to play and getting injured would be horrible and this can help you avoid it:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt0YyxHGijQ&list=PLzAa4D2Mp3qDyJrPnFQq\\_mOzi63ATOebT&index=8&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt0YyxHGijQ&list=PLzAa4D2Mp3qDyJrPnFQq_mOzi63ATOebT&index=8&t=0s)

### **Mark Eadle**

We are sure that you will all remember Mark Eadle, who worked with CJR a few years ago.

After time out of the game developing his golf business, Mark has come back into tennis as Head Professional at Jesmond Dene. Unfortunately, he started there in January and so had barely started before the shutdown.

We thought you might like to see a video he has produced recently, which is in addition to his tennis-related podcasts, in which he talks about the history of equipment, how he got into the game and ends with a Q & A session about the game:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMzX9YMCA2o>

### **Tennis in Print –**

There have not been any articles about tennis recently in the national press of which we are aware, but a Radley member, Tim Harper, has been busy writing. He has produced a crossword for the times, which is stuffed full of tennis-related clues and solutions and appositely entitled 'Crossvird-19'.

You can download it from the T&RA website by using this link:

<https://www.tennisandrackets.com/news/real-tennis-crossword-may-20>.

### **Club Members –**

We are delighted to report more plaudits for Alfred Backhouse, who is one of our most successful Juniors.

The Eton Fives Association has nominated Alfred (Summer Fields and now Eton), for the award of Young Player of the Year. We are not sure when the result will be announced but voting has commenced, so we wish him good luck!

### **Junior World Championship -**

Whilst talking about junior players, we should mention the postponement of the 2020 Real Tennis Junior World Championship. This event started in 2018 and runs in the same years as the men's World Championship.

This year's tournament was due to be held in August at Tuxedo but new timing and a different venue is being worked out currently and it is almost certain that the event will be held in England.

The field of sixteen players is made up of an invited group of the top juniors in the world, of whom eleven are currently based in the UK, underlining the strength of the game here at that level.

Radley has put in a bid to host this event, which would be a thrilling addition to the club's fixture list.

### **A Reminder**

**Radley College will not be taking direct debits for the second quarter's RCTC membership fees, which will be deferred, but, let us hope, for not too much longer.**

*Stay well! Stay fit! Stay apart! Stay cheerful!*

*This Newsletter, the fifth of 2020,  
was compiled by Maggie Henderson-Tew*