



'They play to learn, not teach': Shifting British Attitudes to American Tennis Players around the Turn of the 20th Century

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NASSH Annual Conference, 2017

Chief Aims

- To examine development of Anglo-American relations in lawn tennis around the turn of the 20th century
 - Initial informal connections
 - Early transatlantic tours
 - Assumed differences between British and American players:
 - Approach, skills, style, behaviour
- Contexts of:
 - Divergent amateur ideologies
 - Broader shifting balances of power (political, cultural, economic/industrial, etc.)

Early US Developments (1870s-90s)

- Lawn tennis made a foothold in the north-east:
 - Ivy-league universities; exclusive clubs
- Developments through twin contexts:
 1. American “old money” fascination with, deference toward, and aping of British high culture
 - Clubs, hierarchies, exclusivity, etiquette
 2. American exceptionalism, and desire to “go it alone”
 - E.g. assoc. formation, rules, balls, amateur definition

British Attitudes toward American LT

- **Key question for this presentation: How did the British make sense of emerging American interest and talent in lawn tennis?**
- **Twin narratives:**
 - **Fascination and ridicule**

British Fascination with American Popular Culture

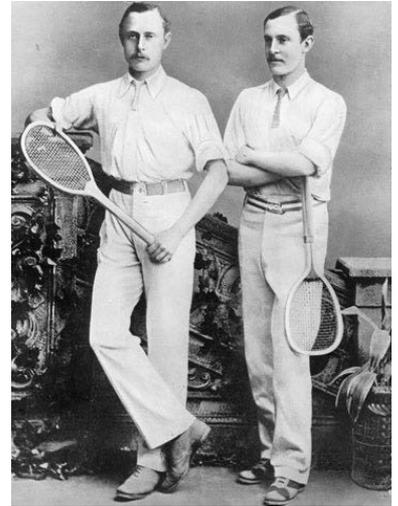
- **In the context of US post-CW industrialization...**
 - **British in awe of Americans' energy and dynamism**
 - **Respected America's less class-divided society**
- **British fascination with “wild west shows” and other American popular cultural expressions**
 - **Inspiring a sense of progress, as if by looking toward America, one was glimpsing the future of civilization**

British Fascination with American Popular Culture

- Reflected in narratives of LT development
 - Pastime (1885): *'Rarely do our Yankee cousins take up anything, whether it business, politics, or pleasure, in a half-hearted manner, and the genuine "thoroughness" with which our genteel pastime has been adopted by them augurs well for its future in America'*.
 - Pastime (1889): *'It is universally admitted nowadays that there is much weight in the claims ... that the land of the future lies beyond the Atlantic. It therefore behoves the philosopher who would form an idea of the character of the coming race ... to keep an eye on the pursuits of our American kinsmen'*.
- Early indications that LT play and approaches reflected assumptions of “national character” and aptitude—a phenomenon that became well understood in the early-1900s

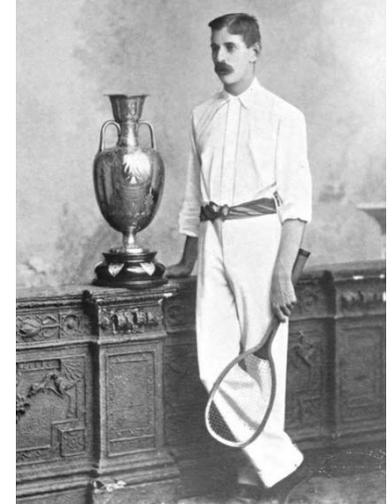
British Ridicule of American Efforts

- 1884: Three top US players ventured to compete in several British tournaments:
 - Pastime (1884): *'Our visitors are here on a pleasure trip, and do not pretend to be equal to the Renshaw's, Lawford and others. They play to learn, not teach.'*
- American LT criticized as *'crude and immature'* (Pastime 1889)
 - Inferior balls, net, net posts, grass, etc.



Assumed British Dominance

- **British (LTA) deemed US unworthy of official tour**
 - **Laissez faire, parochial, conservative, arrogant**
- **Not until the mid/late-1890s did they consider Americans worthy opponents**
 - **Some top British players competed in unsanctioned tours, typically informally arranged**
 - **E.g. Joshua Pim and the 1895 tour**



Lawn Tennis and National Character

- Americans: depicted as carefree, enthusiastic, well-trained and business-like but over-confident and temperamental
 - Joshua Pim (Pastime 1895): American play *'is said to be more brilliant and aggressive than that of our own champions, but less certain. ... It may also be immature in other respects. ... The temperament of the average American athlete is more suited to flashes of superb effort than to steady effective excellence'*.
- Indicative of confidence in British amateur approach to sport:
 - Primacy of self-restraint, pluck, quiet confidence

Lawn Tennis and National Character

- Tables began turning from 1897 onwards...
 - 1897 US tour: poor (unexpected?) results for the British; public condemnation of complacency and feeble excuses
 - *Lawn Tennis Bulletin* (US): 'we have now demonstrated beyond a doubt that in tennis we are on a full par with the English'.
 - 1900 inaugural Davis Cup: 3-0 US victory
 - 1902: US Davis Cup victory, 3-2
 - 1905: 1st overseas female W. singles champion
 - 1907: 1st overseas male W. singles champion



Lawn Tennis and National Character

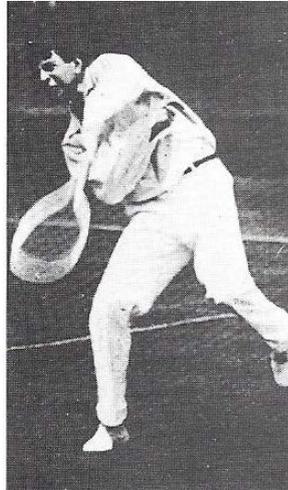
- As transatlantic competitions became more frequent and stakes grew higher, playing style patterns were more apparent and took on greater significance
 - Distinctions now indicated potential success/failure
- Attitudes often considered indicative of divergent amateur interpretations and sense of impending British decline and American advance
 - Both in sport and within global balance of power

Divergent Amateur Approaches

- Behaviour and attitudinal approach were important to the British
 - Privileged presentation of effortlessness in play and/or inconsequentiality to the outcome
 - Against (being seen to receive) training/coaching and taking sport too seriously
 - Against specializing
- Narratives of different playing styles often touched upon these subtle distinctions in amateur ideals

Divergent Amateur Approaches

- Charles Voigt, in *American Lawn Tennis* (1901): *‘The reason [for Am. success] lies therein, that you don’t do things by halves, but devote your whole time and attention to the object you have in view’.*



- Key to American success in 1897, 1900 and 1902 was new “twist” service
 - Kept it secret until the Davis Cup
- Davis & Ward competed in W in 1901 but entered only the doubles event...
 - Praised by USNLTA official:
 - An example of *‘the characteristic determination of Americans to do their absolute best in the thing which they are striving for’* (LT&C 1901).
 - Criticised in Britain:
 - LT&C (1901) claimed *‘they were making rather too much of a business of the affair’.*

Divergent Amateur Approaches

- British also privileged a more patient and graceful playing style:
 - Reflected a deep-rooted preference to beat opponents through precision (placement), guile and steady play
- Outing (1903): What was important for the British is: *‘not the execution of perfect strokes, but certainty of return, ... [to] keep the ball going until by clever headwork (not by a brilliant smash or reckless drive), the point could be won’*.
- LT&B (1906): *‘Englishmen will generally try to do a stroke gracefully’*, whereas the Americans play with *‘no grace and no finesse, only business-like hard hitting, and hurry’*.



Lawn Tennis and National Character

- Connections to assumed “national character” are clear:
 - Town Topics (1904): *‘Broadly stated, the English principle seems to be to let your opponent beat himself by his errors, whereas the American system is to force the play and endeavour to score off the enemy all the time. **The former is a waiting game, which commends itself to the temperament of the visitors, and is profitable not alone in tennis, but in the world at large.** ... We are more impatient here and cannot well control ourselves sufficiently to wait for things to fall into our laps. The consequence is that our tennis is incomparably more brilliant, but less profitable’.*

British Decline Pre-WWI

- **Among the most progressive writers...**
 - **The critical view of British playing styles was compounded by criticisms of their talent development structure, relative to the US:**
 - Lack of tennis in the public schools
 - Lack of suitable coaches and good instruction
 - Lack of performance-oriented (rather than merely participatory) approach to talent development

Concluding Points

- Clear to see that attitudes and beliefs in lawn tennis, though not a ‘national pastime’, helped construct narratives around national identity
- Far from being innocuous, lawn tennis playing styles both reflected, and played a role in helping to define, a sense of “national character” in the US and Britain around the turn of the 20th century
- Divergent approaches toward amateurism in lawn tennis were indisputably connected to assumed differences in “national character”, and were connected with broader global shifts in power

Thanks for listening...

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