

Robert J. Lake
Douglas College

Playing Etiquette, Social Class, and the Changing Landscape of Tennis in the Post-War Period

Aims

- Provide background to research – a work in progress (feedback welcome!)
- Consider research questions
- Summarise methods
- Provide preliminary data and analysis

Research Background

- Main concept: behavioural etiquette
 - On-court behaviour
 - Unwritten rules/code of conduct
- Main question: How can we understand the developments (changes and continuities) in tennis etiquette in the post-war period?
 - Across all levels: recreational, club, elite, etc.
 - Highly nuanced; dynamic; varied

Historical Background: 1870s-1939

- Previous research (Lake 2011; 2012) showed how developments in etiquette reflected:
 - Shifting relations between the classes
 - Mix of UC and MC influences
 - Shifting relations between the genders
 - Aggressive play; dress restrictions
 - Global growth – new influences
 - Shifting amateur values – tennis as a vocation
 - Acceptance of 'playing to win'

Post-war changes in the contexts of...

- Developments at the elite level:
 - Commercialization and media/TV coverage
 - Player agencies and management groups
 - Professionalization and move to Open Era (1968)
 - Rise of women's tennis – Virginia Slims tour (1970)
 - World Team Tennis (1974-78)
 - US Open move from Forest Hills to Flushing Meadow (1978)

Post-war changes in the contexts of...

- Developments at recreational/club level...
 - Increasing provision of public courts (esp. in US)
 - Increasing number of registered players
 - From 5m (1968) to 20m (1980)
 - Growing attendance figures and increasing television viewership at major championships

Shifting Player Demographics

- Introduced the sport to new generation of players, many from poorer backgrounds
 - Wind (1978: xvii): *'The great explosion, which arrived in 1968 or thereabouts, had been brewing for years ... There were suddenly more tennis matches, live and taped, available on television ... Now, with people from all walks of life participating in the boom, for the first time one didn't have to come from a rich family to have a chance to play lots of tennis in his youth, and possibly make a career in the game'*.

New Players = New Influences

- Proliferation of instructional guides in 1970s/80s; increasingly specific rules on behaviour in USTA/ITF code of conduct
- The growing 'problem' of etiquette breaches
 - Before then, there was no need for such rules; tennis players, all coming from the same class with a well-understood behavioural (amateur) code, were assumed to know exactly how to behave

Research Questions

- In what ways and to what extent did broader developments during and after the 'tennis boom' impact tennis etiquette, across all levels of play?
- What remains the rationale for tennis etiquette in the 21st century? To what extent are its status enhancing aspects valued as a means to distinguish tennis (and its players)?

Methodology

- Primary sources
 - Tennis instructional guides (n = 13: 1969-95)
 - Player biographies/autobiographies
 - Magazine articles (tennis-specific & more broad)
 - Online blogs/forums
- Secondary sources
 - Historical analyses and texts, authored by journalists, players, coaches, association reps. and/or commentators

Preliminary Data

- Etiquette divided into 2 (possibly 3) themes:
 - Functional / pragmatic
 - Ensures the smooth maintenance of the game; makes logical sense; ensures safety
 - Considerate
 - Ensures the opponent has an enjoyable experience
 - Some aspects are merely status enhancing – serve no practical function

Functional / Pragmatic (Rec./Club)

- Sending balls back to the service end after each point; ensuring no balls on court
- Retrieving a ball for players from a neighbouring court
- Calling the score before each point
- Making line calls clearly
- Playing doubles rather than singles if people are waiting for a court

Consideration for Others: Honesty, Integrity, Respect

- Calling lines fairly; calling a 'let' if in doubt
- Behaviour that is distracting
- Grunting and excessive noise during a point
- Interrupting the server during a ball toss
- Unnecessary delays in play (bathroom breaks; injury time-outs)
- Hitting straight at an opponent (body shot)
- Drop-shot or underarm serves
- Trash-talking; sledging; verbal intimidation

Status Enhancing: 'Showing Class'

- Showing self-restraint: gracious in defeat and humble in victory; exhibiting anger, aggression or frustration regarding own play
- Generosity of spirit: celebrating opponent's success; offering congratulations on a good shot; apologizing for a lucky shot (e.g. net cord)
- Dressing smart (all whites; shirt)

The Historical Component

- Where is its value?
- Rudyard Kipling: If you can treat these two imposters just the same

Preliminary Data

- Some texts proposed strict guidance
 - Tennis player identity blended all 3 themes
 - A means of distinction
- Some texts proposed gamesmanship tactics:
 - Highlighting a clear shift in emphasis to winning
 - *'Any exchanges that seem to patronize their play are always to your benefit: "Good try" or "Sorry, a bit long", after shots they've missed.'*
 - *'If you spot a weakness in an opponent, make sure he realizes you know about it.'* (Graebner & Graebner 1973)
 - But always tempered...

Preliminary Data

- Opportunities for gamesmanship are frequent and often hard to detect (intent)
- However...
 - Players, fans, club members, administrators (and even sponsors) collectively are arbiters of tennis etiquette
- Breaches are rarely ignored and invariably subject to public reprimand
- Adherence to etiquette norms as a means to being included/accepted/welcomed??

Summary: Importance of Etiquette

- Etiquette and player behaviour as a manifestation of changes to the sport
- Struggles and disagreements reflected competing influences and values at all levels:

Amateur (game) – professional (job)

Gentleman/lady – player

Participation – winning

Morality – competition

Loyalty: to the sport – to capitalism/wealth

Opponents: ends in themselves – means to an end

Concluding Thoughts

- Key questions:
 - To what extent is the nostalgic value of etiquette in tennis sustained in the present day? And if so, how and why?
 - Does tennis etiquette reflect contemporary class dynamics in the sport?
 - Is etiquette important as a component of what makes tennis an aspirational sport – i.e. a component of how tennis players *want* to be thought of?

Thank you.
