

STANDING IN LINE

30 YEARS OF
OBSESSIVE QUEUING
AT WIMBLEDON



pitch

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with illustrations by Zebedee Helm



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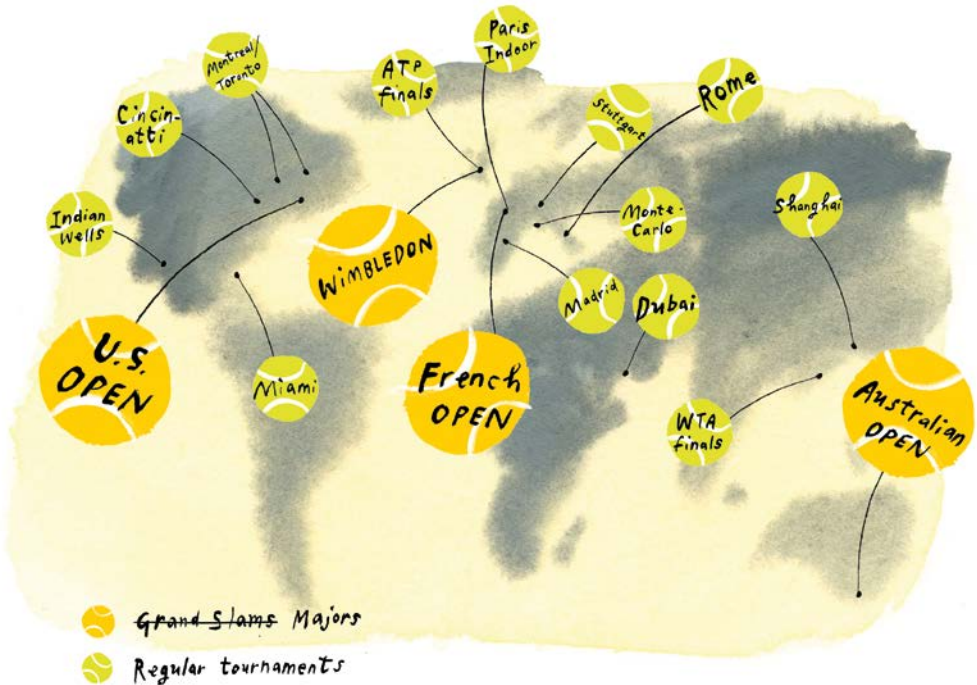
THE TENNIS CALENDAR AND THE 'GRAND SLAM'



STANDING IN LINE

People often refer to the major tennis tournaments as 'Grand Slams', which is technically incorrect, in that they should really be called 'Majors'. There are four major tennis tournaments, at which the men's and women's events are played simultaneously, which all carry the most ranking points; the Australian Open in Melbourne, the French Open in Paris, Wimbledon in Wimbledon and the US Open in New York.

These are the 'Majors', even if the whole world, possibly with the exception of me, now calls them 'Grand Slams'. The four of these major tournaments together were called a 'Grand Slam', in the sense that if you win all the Majors (in any event, including doubles) in one calendar year then you have achieved the Grand Slam. It is kind of a big deal to do this in the singles discipline. It was achieved by Don Budge



THE TENNIS CALENDAR AND THE 'GRAND SLAM'

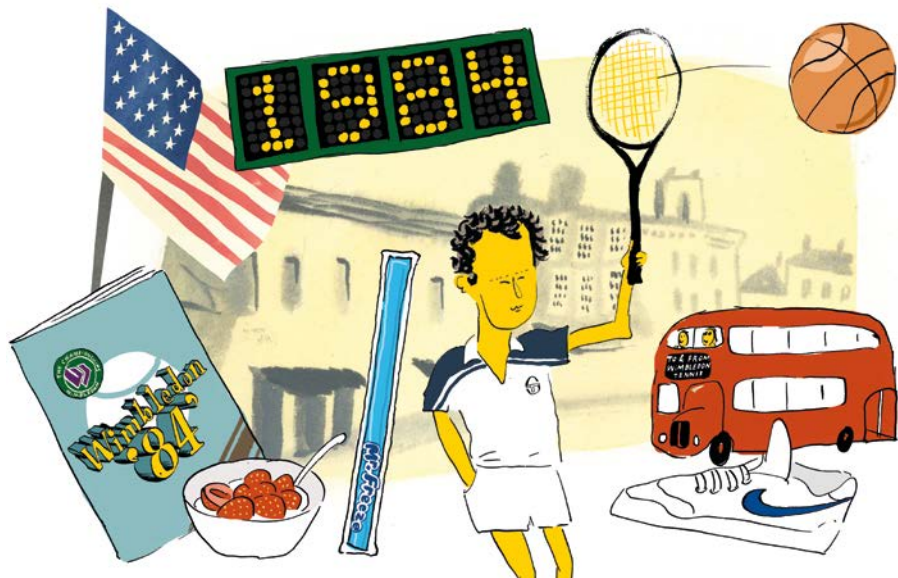
in 1938, Maureen Connolly in 1953, Rod Laver in 1962 and 1969 (the only person to do it twice, the second time even more incredible than the first), Margaret Court in 1970 and Steffi Graf in 1988 (who also added the Olympics gold for good measure).

Scattered around the rest of these Majors are pretty big events all over the world – some are only for ladies, like Stuttgart, and some only the gents, like Monte Carlo, which seems like a rough deal for the ladies. The term 'Grand Slam' itself most likely dates back to playing card games, with golf also using it in the same way as far back as 1930. Despite their utter brilliance, the mythical Grand Slam has been a feat never achieved by Martina Navratilova, Pete Sampras, Serena Williams or Roger Federer.

It should be noted here that Wimbledon is the only Major at which you can get tickets for showcourts by sleeping out the night before.

I have come to see this as a mixed blessing.





LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

My introduction to the joys of Wimbledon queuing came on Wednesday, 27 June 1984, aged ten. The year had been exciting already, what with Sweden winning the Eurovision Song Contest with a number called ‘Diggi-Loo Diggi-Ley’ and WHAM! releasing ‘Wake Me Up Before you Go-Go’. My Mum picked me up at 12.15pm on a half-day and we walked to the bus stop, via the newsagents where I was allowed a blue raspberry-flavoured Mr Freeze ice pop¹⁰. It was, as in all the best childhood memories, wonderfully sunny and warm, and most likely a slightly idealised reconstruction.

At Wimbledon train station in the high street we hopped on to an old Routemaster bus emblazoned with the thrilling sign, ‘TO & FROM WIMBLEDON TENNIS’, taking our seats at the front of the upper deck. Once full, the bus took us up the hill, through the village and down Church Road where the glory of the All England Club is first seen, unfurling in front of you like a dream. The Queue seemed endless, just as it always would.

¹⁰ In the Eighties raspberry-flavoured iced treats (see also Slush Puppie) were always blue. I assume this is because red had already been bagged by the A-List strawberry.

STAR-SPANGLED

It was a wonderful parade of international people, all in one place, unlike anything I had ever seen. There weren't many Japanese people where I lived in south London, but here they were all around, along with Australians, Indians and exotic South Americans. I remember the north Americans most vividly, as, being aged ten, the USA seemed impossibly cool and aspirational, with television dominated by *Chips*, *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *The Fall Guy*. Those shows had a different look on the screen, a whole different colour palette, making America seem incredibly 'other', like a hazy distant planet. It was a place where seemingly everyone was tanned, had great hair and wore amazing white Nike trainers, knee socks and tiny jean shorts. And that was just the fellas. At the head of that line were the adversarial Glimmer Twins of world tennis; JP McEnroe and JS Connors, and I, like most people I knew, was firmly in the McEnroe camp. His wretched genius was less appreciated than his compulsive winning and his supercool Sergio Tacchini kit. Added to that, he argued with the adults about everything, something a ten-year-old could really relate to.

MAKING HIS MIND UP

John Lloyd was the top British player, ranked 31 that year, and he lost in straight sets in the third round to an American, Scott Davis. This was an inconvenience as he had stated his intent in the papers at the start of the week, under the declarative headline 'It's NOW or NEVER'^{vi}. Lloyd never really got on with Wimbledon on a performance level but what he lacked in results he more than made up for in glitz, looking like one of the blokes in Bucks Fizz and being married to Chris Evert in her glamorous, 'primary-school-teacher-you've-gotta-crush-on' phase, one half of tennis' Golden Couple. I heard

later that some people referred to him as ‘Mr Evert’ behind his back, which was a bit cruel, but she had won 16 Majors by that point to his none.

MUM, WE’RE NOT IN SOUTH LONDON ANYMORE

That day we walked along Church Road, through the teeming crowds, at every gate getting a glimpse of the action going on inside, as we looped into Somerset Road, eventually reaching the end and joining The Queue for ‘ground passes’¹¹. The main thing I remember about The Queue that day was that it seemed to take forever to move and a kindly man in clothes like I wore to school (funny hat, blazer, white shirt, tie) came along and gave me a bowl of strawberries and cream for no reason. He told me his name was David Jenkins and I called him ‘Mr Jenkins’, as back then us kids always spoke to adults with a respectful formality. ‘Move along now, no dilly-dallying please,’ I remember him politely barking at The Queue in general.

The mass of people crawled along as, thrillingly, you could now hear the sound of balls being thwacked, interspersed by oohs and aahs on what was then Court 2, next to the fence. At some point we entered through a turnstile and I was given a pristine white ticket, priced at £4.00, giving access to a pulsating world of festivity and delight. Wandering through the enormous maze that is the ‘outside courts’ I can vividly remember the overwhelming spectacle, as giants of the athletic arena, bronzed sporting gods and goddesses, did battle in immaculate grass arenas. But we were on a mission, and ten minutes later we had found it.

Another queue.

¹¹ A non-showcourt ticket which entitles you to use unreserved seating and standing room on Courts No.3–18.

This one was for 'returned tickets' and appeared way longer than The Queue we had just left. Mum, who seemed to know what she was doing, assured me that all was in hand but it felt to me that, on arriving at the Holy Grail, we had now wilfully left and joined another group of people standing in a line and not watching tennis. These returned tickets were gathered up from red boxes situated by the exits where they had been handed in by (crazy) people actually leaving the stadium before the tennis had finished. This queue moved faster and in what seemed no time I was being dragged back through the crowds, in the direction whence we had come, past some stewards, under a few tunnels, down some walkways and boom, there it was.

Another queue.

My audible exasperation was met with a scowl from a giant soldier as it was clear that silence was very much in order in this cool corridor we were now standing in. Minutes later the sound of clapping erupted and we were heading up some stairs and in to the glorious daylight. We were here, on the Centre Court, and I could barely believe my eyes. It was like the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when everything goes Technicolor.

THE BIG SMOKE

I already thought that a sports programme of any description was a thrill, particularly for football matches, of which I had a collection of hundreds, almost all from lower league games I had not attended. The giant official Wimbledon programme was handed to me by an Honorary Steward, who came over to where we were sitting. I can remember the adverts for 'The Virginia Slims World Championships', the 'Benson & Hedges Championships' and even Marlboro Leisure Wear.¹²

¹² This was also an era when Martina Navratilova wore an entire kit sponsored by KIM cigarettes and Arthur Ashe was a spokesman for Philip Morris.

The steward told me that the programme was for me to keep and said, 'Toodle pip' when he left to go and talk to someone else. I was hooked by this stuff. I was even more hooked by the fact that we had seats to watch none other than J.P. McEnroe, playing doubles with Peter Fleming, against a pairing I had never heard of. This was definitely the most exciting thing that had happened to me since I fell out of the back door of the Ford Escort in the Safeways car park in 1982.



THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

On leaving the hallowed Centre Court I saw that play was still going on all over the place. My patient Mum was dragged from corner to corner as I devoured every last drop of tennis available, even as courts were covered with giant tents and the day drew in. We walked up the Church Road hill that evening, me walking backwards so I could keep looking at the grounds, until the view disappeared as we reached the road into Wimbledon village. It was a giant party and everyone

was queuing ... for everything! There were people standing in line at wooden bars, at tables selling t-shirts, at taxi stands and at streetside barbecues, it was like opening a door to a whole new life, all this queuing, and I seriously wanted to take my place.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

We always watched *Wimbledon '84* on the telly at home and I was quite taken with a guy just six years older, and 40 kilos heavier, than me, called 'Boris' who seemed to spend as much time diving on the grass as he did hitting the ball. I decided straight away that he was to be 'my player'. It was also the Centenary year for the Ladies' Championships and on the Saturday the final was played out fittingly between Chris Lloyd (still listed then as 'Mrs J.M. Lloyd', after her husband) and Miss M. Navratilova, as it seemed to be every year. Chris Evert-Lloyd (as we all knew her) was the one my Dad said had nice legs, and I didn't have a clue what to make of Martina.

McEnroe destroyed Jimmy Connors to win the Gentlemen's Singles title the following day, 6-1, 6-1, 6-2, making just three unforced errors in the entire match¹³. Much later I would read that he was, that afternoon, in what sportsmen call 'the zone', a rarely reached dreamlike status of perfection in which everything becomes astonishingly easy and errors virtually disappear as a concept. He said afterwards that he was 'seeing the ball like a basketball', which I still think sounds pretty odd, and strangely more difficult.

¹³ It would be just one of a whopping 84 matches he won in 1984, losing only three.



Ladies' Champion *Martina Navratilova*
Gentlemen's Champion *John McEnroe*