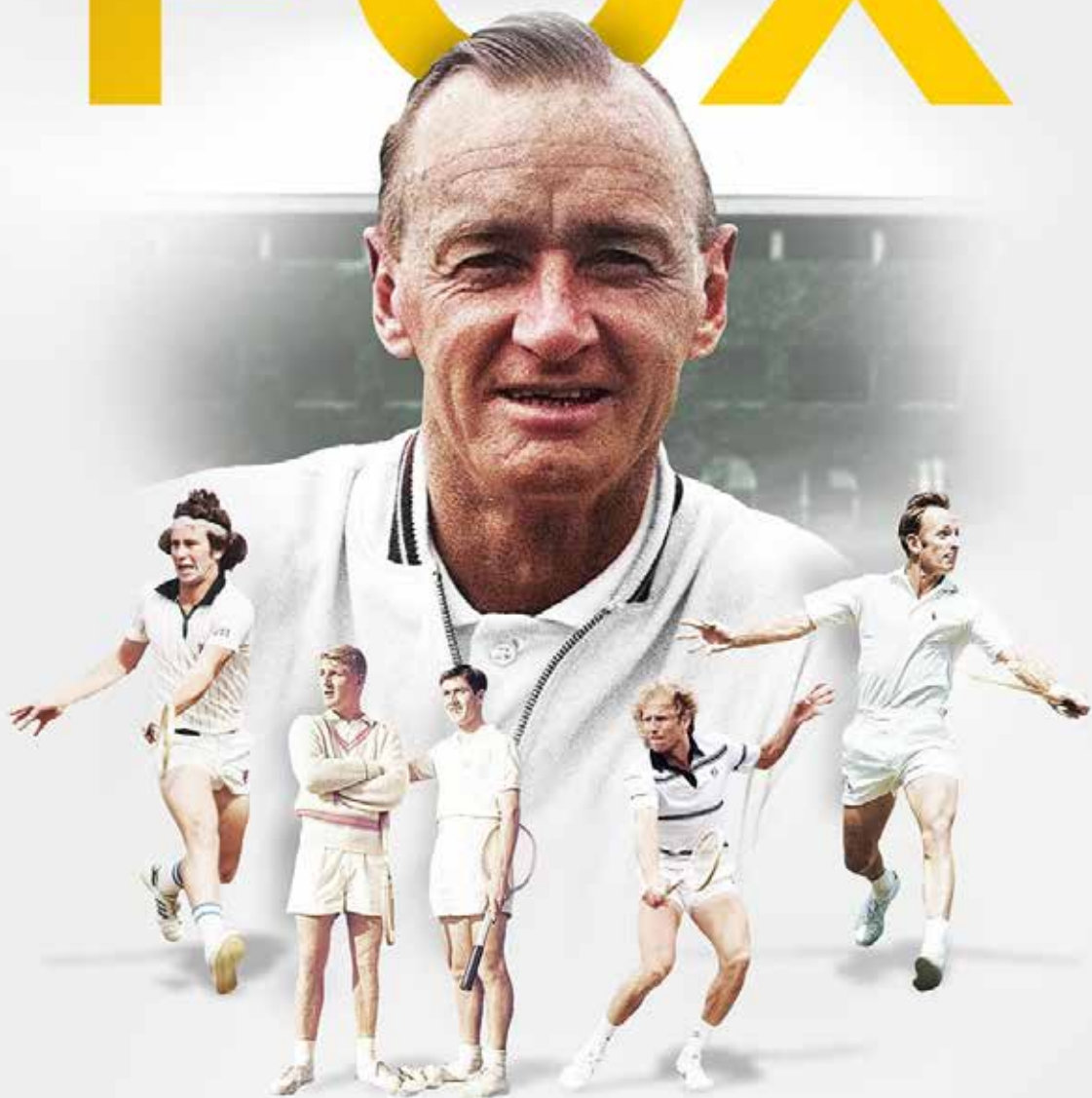


MICHAEL SEXTON

FOX

THE



HARRY HOPMAN

and the Greatest Dynasty in Tennis History

M I C H A E L S E X T O N

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THE FOX
PART ONE

1.

A SHADOW SHOW

Monte Carlo 1928

FOR HARRY Hopman it was number five. He loved that number. In tennis, the fifth game is often where the set turns. In the major tournaments, each match is the best of five sets. The Davis Cup has five rubbers. Hopman held that number close to his heart.

The affair began at the most romantic of tennis settings. The Monte Carlo Country Club was a spread of courts, separated by alleys of cypress pines and flowerbeds overlooking the Ligurian Sea. Prince Louis the Second of Monaco had ordered it built as a showpiece of the French Riviera. An Art Deco clubhouse was for members to lounge in while catching the breezes. Ted Tinling called it 'an ode to tennis'.

The paint was still drying at Easter in 1928 when the Australian Davis Cup team arrived. Their winding six-week boat voyage had taken them from Sydney to Perth through Ceylon, Naples and to Toulon where they boarded a train for Monte Carlo. They were drawn to play Italy at Genoa plus a series of events considered 'holiday tournaments' on the way.

In the lead was the imposing Gerald Patterson for whom the quest was a final fling. The Victorian had won the Australian doubles title as a teenager before the war shut down the sport. He served in the Royal Field Artillery in the First World War and was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery at Messines. After the war, he collected the first of his two Wimbledon singles titles.

Patterson was a beast on the court who used his height and strength to hammer the ball. His groundstrokes were satisfactory, but his serve and overheads were devastating. The smash he unleashed during the doubles of the 1925 Davis Cup Inter-Zonal Final at Forest Hills left his French opponent Jean Borotra unconscious.

Patterson's partner that day was Jack Hawkes who was also in Monte Carlo, having paid his own way after missing out on selection. The administrators were scratching for money and so only sent a team of three: Patterson, the emerging 19-year-old Jack Crawford and his doubles partner Harry Hopman, who admitted to squeezing into the team after 'a series of trials'.

Crawford was bred in the country and gentrified in the city. He had taught himself by hitting balls against the side of the family farmhouse at Urangeline in the New South Wales Riverina. When the family moved to Sydney's north shore he emerged as a star. Crawford played tennis like a character from *The Great Gatsby*. He was six feet tall and wore an easy smile. He seemed to float across the baseline, always finding the right angles with his square-topped racquet. The half-volleys he played at mid-court were testament to his judgement and his forehand was a work of art – smooth and accurate. So effortless was his play that he rarely rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt or bent creases in his flannel trousers. When the ball was hit to him, Crawford seemed

to anticipate its arrival, welcome it onto his racquet and despatch it with best wishes. Donald Budge called him one of the prettiest players he had seen.

Crawford was nicknamed ‘Gentleman Jack’ and Hopman admired him deeply, calling his forehand ‘fabulous’. In Crawford, Hopman saw a vision of an Australian sportsman. ‘Jack Crawford,’ he cooed half a century later, ‘was *the* boy.’

In comparison, Hopman was a battler, but they formed a fine doubles combination, and their youthful success created a wave of interest in tennis. Australia’s Davis Cup selection for 1928 was a nod to the past and a glance to the future. Each day was a chance for the two young men from Sydney to learn on the achingly beautiful courts of Europe. Crawford scribbled in his diary, quoting a favourite author, Richard Curle, who called the world *The Shadow-Show*: ‘I was standing in the wings and was seeing the mounting of the thousand tableaux, viewing our beautiful, unreal world as one – as a very young one – who had played a game which was and would be a reality.’

Patterson was their guide to the world, of which he had already seen the best and worst. He was from old money in Melbourne. Added to his wealth was the reflected fame of being the nephew of opera star Dame Nellie Melba. In contrast to Patterson’s reputation for being forthright and impatient, Crawford found him kind and generous. He later mused that ‘pictures from half-forgotten schoolbooks became real and living. Harry and I felt that we were growing up. I suspect that Gerald Patterson often had a sly laugh at the exuberance and enthusiasm of his two colts.’

The dream sequence for the young Australians continued by reaching out to shake the hand of the sport’s royalty. When they arrived in Monte Carlo, they were greeted by René Lacoste

who was the greatest player in the world. The French were the defending Davis Cup champions, and their success was spread through a quartet of players – Borotra, Jacques Brugnon, Henri Cochet and Lacoste.

They were called ‘The Musketeers’ in homage to Alexandre Dumas’s novel and it suited the idea that their racquets, like epees, skilfully sliced through their opposition. During the 1920s and 30s they collected 43 major titles, but it was collectively that they were impenetrable – winning the Davis Cup six consecutive years. To cater to the demand to see them, a new stadium was built in Paris in 1928, named *Stade Roland Garros* in honour of a French war hero, with wooden stands around centre court to fit 10,000 spectators. The men would play for silverware named *La Coupe des Mousquetaires* – The Musketeer’s Trophy.

Given his status as the most glamorous of the Musketeers, the Australians were surprised to find Lacoste quiet and unassuming. One morning Hopman and Crawford went to a practice court just to watch the Frenchman. Crawford described his hitting as ‘superb’ but as the perfection continued there was a sinking feeling in the Australians that they were not in this class.

‘Hoppy looked at me, and I looked at Hoppy,’ Crawford wrote. ‘The joy of wearing our Australian blazers went in a flash.’

On the court Lacoste was too good for Hopman in the semi-final at Monte Carlo, winning in straight sets. ‘It was no disgrace. The little chap stood up to the bombardment of Lacoste’s service and his returns were excellent. But he was outclassed by the amazing precision and dash of the Frenchman,’ wrote Crawford.

A week later Crawford delivered on his promise by winning the singles title in Rome. He then teamed with Patterson to take the doubles. Although Crawford and Hopman were selected as a

doubles combination, Patterson had been experimenting by teaming with Hopman in Monte Carlo and now Crawford in Rome.

When the team arrived in Genoa, the likelihood grew that Hopman would not be selected. He had lost in straight sets in Rome where his form was described as 'uncertain' by newspaper reports. Two days before the tie with Italy, Patterson decided he would play both singles and doubles. Hopman was out.

Crowds of several hundred came to watch the Australians practice and posters advertising the *Coppa Davis* were plastered around the city. Temporary stands were built around the court, which was wedged beneath a Roman viaduct. A ring of nearby buildings was crammed with spectators who peered down at the chocolate-coloured court. They were disappointed on the first day as rain washed out all play. The delay was the least of the worries for the Australians. Behind their stoic faces, there was a crisis. Crawford was asthmatic (and a smoker) and was suffering terribly in the conditions. Two days before the tie, a doctor had been called to the Miramar Hotel room that Crawford was sharing with Hopman. He ordered the windows closed, which created a heavy, humid atmosphere where Crawford wheezed and barked for hours. To try to ease his team-mate's aching sides, Hopman spread a mix of eucalyptus oil, menthol and camphor on his chest. The only way Crawford could find relief was to sleep in a chair propped up against the wall with his feet resting on the edge of the bed. It was Hopman's job to stay awake to make sure that the chair didn't move during the night and interrupt the precious sleep.

On Sunday morning the ground staff at the court removed tarpaulins to discover they were less than waterproof and so poured petrol over the damp patches and set them alight. At the Miramar

Hotel, Crawford insisted to Patterson that he play, and the captain reluctantly agreed.

Crawford emerged as a shadow while his opponent bristled with confidence. Baron Uberto de Morpurgo was an aggressive player who introduced himself to the Australians by, according to Hopman, '[telling us] all about his most famous successes'. The boasting irritated Crawford but the asthma had drained him, and it took only 75 minutes for the Italian to put him out of his misery. The Australians watched in agony as they saw Crawford lathered in perspiration, unable to run across the baseline and only having the energy to pat the ball back. Crawford later said there were times he all but lost consciousness, 'The ground seemed to be coming up to meet me, and I could think only of a beautifully soft pillow to lay my aching head on.' Australia's vision of tennis perfection was now helped off the court and returned to a chair propped against the wall of his stuffy hotel room.

Patterson evened the tie using power and nous against the unorthodox Giorgio de Stefani. The Italian was ambidextrous and hit a forehand off both wings. He played exclusively from the baseline and was able to run down most shots because he never had to take the time to turn his back to play a backhand.

Patterson played drop shots to bring him to net and then drove the ball directly at his opponent, catching him in the awkward tangle of having to choose which hand to return with. The tactic drew hoots from the crowd but resulted in a 6-1, 6-3, 6-3 victory in just 43 minutes.

Back at the hotel, Patterson looked at Crawford and declared him unfit to play. So, it was on Sunday evening, 6 May 1928, that 21-year-old Harry Hopman was told he would be playing Davis Cup for Australia on a clay court under a Roman viaduct in Genoa.

The match was a near riot as a crowd estimated at 2,000 squeezed in. They were divided by those who knew the game and those there for the novelty. The latter group sat in the full sun and barracked without being hampered by an understanding of the rules or etiquette. It seemed the umpire, Count Bonacossa, was similarly unblemished by experience. Several times in the first set he called the scores wrongly and had to be corrected. Patterson had not won admirers the day before and the crowd roared for anything that went Italy's way, even if it was incorrect. After a time, a second wave of noise came from the expensive seats in the shade where lovers of the game hushed the noisier sections, who responded with more heckling.

Hopman's enduring memory was 'walking along close to the backstop fencing waiting for the noise to die down as the whole medley of linesman's errors, poor umpiring and various crowd noises sounded like pandemonium to me'.

In later years the Australians reflected that the crowd mood in 1928 was heightened and suspected the rise of nationalism was to blame. It seemed the match was treated by some as less a sporting contest and more a demonstration of political strength.

The Italian pair of De Morpurgo and Placido Gaslini took full advantage and won the first two sets 6-3, 6-4. Patterson saw their momentum was being fuelled by the barracking, which in turn was making the umpiring more partisan. He demanded the chair umpire be replaced and so officials brought in Clemente Serventi, who was an Italian Davis Cup squad member, to take the chair. The Australian captain also slowed the game using lobs and slices. His tactics unsettled the Italians who dropped the next two sets 1-6, 1-6.

The final set swung Italy's way when De Morpurgo twice hit winners off Patterson's serve. It was Hopman who faltered under

the pressure, playing several poor shots and ineffective lobs. The rubber went to Italy 6-2 in the fifth.

Patterson started the reverse singles in a defiant strut, thrashing through the first set 6-1 in 11 minutes. He couldn't maintain the pace and De Morpurgo reeled him in 4-6, 3-6 before the Australian took the fourth 6-2. The expense of effort and emotion took its toll and Patterson dropped the final set 1-6 to give Italy the tie. After the contest, the two players were presented with tie pins by the District Chief, featuring a diamond-encrusted fascist symbol. In the aftermath, few spectators stayed to watch the dead rubber which Hopman fought hard before losing to De Stefani 7-5, 9-7, 10-8. It was the first time Australia had lost in the opening round of the Davis Cup and it wouldn't happen again for another 40 years.

The sting in Hopman's ears came later with widespread criticism of his selection. An anonymous press report told of a conversation between De Morpurgo and Patterson where the Italian said, 'If you had played him [Hawkes] in the doubles and the singles, you and not we would have been playing Romania in the second round.'

Hopman immersed himself in every moment – a lifetime of emotions crammed into several weeks. He felt the slight of criticism of his selection, stewed on the injustices of the conditions and the hurt of the loss but there was the fortitude of Patterson, the determination of Crawford to play for his country and the fast loyalty that grew between young men. There was the collective strength of the French players and the rewards reaped from it. They were all the passions of a heightened scale that sport could deliver, and he wanted more of it.

In the final days in Monte Carlo, the Australians spent their evenings in the club casino. Norman Brookes and Patterson played

for recreation while Crawford watched 'strained faces', and piles of money being lost.

It was Hopman who loved it most. The action sparked his senses. His system was based on number five, and it paid off handsomely with a string of wins. It was now his numerical talisman. In the evening he wound his alarm clock and set it to wake him at 5.55 am. Every morning he awoke to live another day toward a life he had first experienced in 1928.