



Graham Denton

The  
**GOLDEN  
BOY** of  
Centre Court

How **Bjorn Borg**  
Conquered Wimbledon

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## Contents

The Iceman Cometh	7
25 June – 8 July 1973	21
24 June – 6 July 1974	52
23 June – 5 July 1975	84
21 June – 3 July 1976	107
20 June – 2 July 1977	134
26 June – 8 July 1978	167
25 June – 7 July 1979	196
23 June – 5 July 1980	228
22 June – 4 July 1981	264
The Iceman Melts Away	302
Acknowledgements	316
Bibliography	317

## The Iceman Cometh

THE SPIRE of St Mary's Church rose up in the distance like a pencil point sketching a sky over south-west London. Standing on the roof of the competitors' tearoom at the All England Club, home of the Wimbledon Championships, the oldest tennis tournament in the world, a 16-year-old Swedish boy was gazing out over the expanse of outside courts towards it. It was early July 1972, and the youngster had not long claimed the title of Wimbledon junior champion, emerging from the final of the invitation event victorious against Britain's Christopher 'Buster' Mottram. Beside him, John Barrett, a former Davis Cup player and captain, asked the boy what his ambition was in the game. 'To be the best player in the world,' came the quiet reply. It was, Barrett later recorded in his book, *100 Wimbledon Championships: A Celebration*, 'spoken without a trace of conceit, stated as a fact'.

It's perhaps appropriate that Bjorn Borg, born in 1956, came into the world on 6 June. For it was a national holiday celebrating Swedish Flag Day, a day that marked the crowning of the country's first monarch, King Gustav Vasa, in 1523 – in effect signifying the end of the Danish-ruled Kalmar Union, and the birth of Swedish autonomy – as well as commemorating Sweden adopting its constitution on the same day in 1809. Appropriate because, the only child of Margarethe and Rune – he

## The Golden Boy of Centre Court

was given his father's name for a middle name – Bjorn Borg grew up a spirited, strong-willed and thoroughly independent individual determined to plough his own furrow.

He was born and brought up in Sodertalje, an industrial manufacturing town of then around 40,000 people, 30 minutes' drive south-west of the country's capital, Stockholm. A predominantly working-class town, it was most notable for producing Volkswagen car parts. And ice hockey stars. Borg, like most Swedish schoolboys, was raised on the game, reared on a rink, slapping a puck back and forth. He was a highly promising player. Even at the age of five he showed signs of outstanding talent. At nine years old, he became the centre-forward for his town's junior team. The game was almost an addiction for him and for those first nine years of his life, the young athlete had no greater aim than to wear the jersey bearing the emblem of the 'Three Crowns', the shirt of 'Tre Kronor', the men's national outfit. There were many who considered him more than capable of achieving it.

Call it fate, providence, a happy accident, what you will, but, in the summertime of 1965, everything changed. Although an article by Shirley Brasher in *The Observer*, 3 June 1973, would state that had it not been for a lucky raffle ticket and a winning draw at his father's local table tennis club, Borg might never have played tennis at all, while English sports journalist Frank Keating had it that Mr Borg actually made his son his first wooden racket, the generally accepted story is slightly different: that Rune, 33 at the time and employed as a clothing salesman, was a very fine table tennis player – one of the country's best – and when he collected, as first prize in the town's annual championship, a golden, adult tennis racket, not interested in the game himself, he bestowed it to his son to simply, as Borg later recorded, 'play around with'. 'And that's how I started playing,' Borg would confirm time and again over the years as the tale became the stuff of legend.

Initially fascinated by its frame, once Borg took possession of the racket, tennis took hold of him. Starting playing, however, wasn't that straightforward. The racket too heavy for him to hold, the right-handed Borg gripped it with both hands, playing all his shots, forehand and backhand, in what was a distinctive two-fisted fashion, the way he'd learned to swing an ice hockey stick. To begin with, even hitting the ball he found almost impossible. But Borg was undeterred. Launching fanatically into his new obsession, practice morning and night – soon a daily ritual – brought brisk improvement.

Smacking a ball against the grey garage door at his family's home in a large modern complex – they lived in a first-floor apartment – Borg spent every spare moment, long, solitary hours, competing with himself, but pretending in his fair-haired head he was Sweden facing a formidable foe in a Davis Cup rubber. 'If I hit the ball five times against the door, I got the point,' he would recall. 'If less than five, the United States got the point.' And though the repetitive thudding sometimes drove his mother to beg him to stop and certain neighbours to complain, the youngster ploughed on regardless.

Having at first been turned away from the overcrowded beginners' course at the Sodertalje tennis club, when a vacancy opened, Borg spent the remainder of his summer there, honing his new skills from 7am until dusk, constantly pleading for someone to hit with, never willingly leaving the court until his parents collected him. Mrs Borg even asked if her nine-year-old son could enter the neighbouring village tournament's doubles to give him more match practice.

A placid, pleasantly modest child, Borg was, nonetheless, also one who possessed a vigorous urge to succeed; he strove to excel at whatever he did. Both Margarethe and Rune viewed his drive as a positive and necessary quality. In any field in life, they believed, you had to fight to achieve. It was

something they'd always fostered. Weekends were spent organising games for him. On family boat rides to a close-by island, for instance, they'd tack a target to a tree and defeat the young Bjorn at darts. He was a boy who hated to lose. At anything. 'I cried and cried when I lost,' Borg recalled. 'They would let me win then, and I would get confidence back.' It was his parents, he would later acknowledge, that 'taught me to be competitive and persistent'.

He was extremely stubborn as well. 'If his mind was set,' his mother told ITV's Brian Moore during the making of a 1980 ITV documentary, 'it was impossible to change.' That quickly became obvious at the tennis club. While Borg's homespun groundstrokes made him a laughing stock with some, they had others tearing out their hair. Told by older members to alter his two-handed grip, that what he was doing was 'wrong', the youngster resisted, sticking steadfastly with what worked best, what felt right. 'The members got angry with me,' he recorded in his 1980 book, *My Life and Game*, 'because I obstinately refused to listen.'

It was at the club the following summer after enrolling on a course that he met Percy Rosberg. Sweden's leading tennis coach of the day, Rosberg was a teacher employed by the national federation to scout budding talent and prepare any discoveries for international play. In Sodertalje to observe the skills of two 13-year-olds, Peter Abrink and Leif Johansson, thought to be the country's rising stars, Rosberg instead had his practised eye caught by the skinny little novice about three years their junior. The ten-year-old Borg played what Rosberg termed 'working tennis', without much style; he didn't know how to serve (he had no timing); his grip of the racket was highly unusual; gangly and somewhat awkward, when he scurried around retrieving balls, he reminded his young opponents of a 'bull, charging'.

Yet Rosberg, knocking up with Borg for about 20 minutes each session, noted the young player's ability to return the ball consistently, accurately –



‘he could put the ball where he wanted it’ – and with great power. ‘I had to run well even then to get it back,’ Rosberg reflected some years afterwards. He was already remarkably quick about the court. ‘His footwork was fantastic,’ Rosberg said. The youngster also impressed the coach with his desire to learn – ‘he kept bothering [me] with questions’ – and his fighting spirit. There was something – ‘this look in his eyes’ – that told Rosberg that Borg was special.

Receiving both praise and criticism, Borg appreciated Rosberg’s coaching methods. So, when the boy was invited to train with him at the Salk Club in Stockholm, he jumped at the opportunity. Soon, Borg embarked on a rigorous everyday routine of commuting by train to the capital after school, playing, coming home late, studying, bed, getting up to go to school, then getting on the train again. At school, his mother said, ‘he read his home lessons very well’, but it was in sport – soccer as well as ice hockey and now tennis – that his physical and mental energies had always been truly invested. And even though his devotion to tennis inevitably saw Borg’s education suffer, far from interfering, Margarethe and Rune fully supported their son’s pursuit.

Such was their backing that when, in July 1967, Borg heard brand-new Wimbledon champion John Newcombe say on the wireless that he had originally learned to play the game by reading a 50-year-old instructional book, *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball* by former American great, ‘Big Bill’ Tilden, Mr Borg selflessly scoured Sweden’s bookshops for a translation so that his son could stay up nights reading and learning by heart Tilden’s ‘13 Points for Young Players to Remember’. Among those the youngster committed to memory were: Tennis should be played defensively with an offensive attitude; Never ever blow an easy shot; Start a match with one alternative strategy up your sleeve – but never change a winning game; Have a killer instinct but also be a sportsman.



Borg had a strong advocate in Rosberg too. While the federation also wanted the youngster to ditch the two-handed grip, Rosberg, resisting any attempt to destroy Borg's unorthodox but effective groundstrokes, concentrated instead on improving his comparatively weaker serve-and-volley. Rather than rush the net, though, Borg preferred to stay back pounding away with metronomic rhythm and regularity. 'I feel good at the baseline,' he told the coach. And he was good. 'Even then he would hit one more ball back against the opponent,' Rosberg said.

His style was still questioned; it was 'too jerky' and unreliable according to all the teaching pros. 'No champion,' Borg was told, 'used that grip.' 'Change to a more accepted approach,' came the counsel. He still wasn't listening. Tennis, he felt, was a highly personalised game, one, he would later write, 'of instinct and common sense, rather than proper grips and tedious tips'. Despite what he was instructed and custom dictated, it called for innovation and originality. Playing in his own fashion, refusing to be trapped by the rules of technique, Borg confounded decades of coaching tradition; it was the unexpected, he later held, that gave him an edge over those that followed more predictable patterns.

As it turned out, whilst developing his game, Borg discovered that it was easier to hit the ball with topspin if he adopted a one-handed forehand, using a western grip with a closed racket face, holding the heel of the racket inside his palm and whipping the ball over the net. 'All wrist, like a ping-pong shot,' Rosberg called it. It gave the ball an exaggerated spin. Borg made the stroke with his shoulders open and his feet out of position according to the book. But like a table tennis player walloping the little celluloid ball, Borg now packed a forehand drive with a killer punch behind it. He was quickly snuffing out opposition.

Only 11 when tennis's Open era started in April 1968, he didn't need too much time to make a name for himself. In 1967, Borg had won his

first tournament, beating Lars Goran Nyman in the Sormland County Championships, and over the next four years, he swept every junior championship in his age division. In 1968, he won the Swedish National School title; the following year, the National Junior Championships for 13- and 14-year-olds. By the time he was 13 he was beating the best of Sweden's under-18 players like a drum.

In 1970, the same year that he committed himself completely to tennis, Borg was selected to represent Sweden in his first international tournament, a junior championship in Berlin, the then East German capital. He won it. There were other impressive successes in tournaments in Barcelona, Milan and at the prestigious Orange Bowl in Miami on his first trip to the US in 1971 (a championship for boys 18 and under he would win again in December 1972 after a straight-sets victory in the final over a young American named Vitas Gerulaitis). On home territory he would serve notice with victories over some far more seasoned opponents – the Puerto Rican Charlie Pasarell at the Swedish Pro Tennis Championships in Gothenburg in October 1972 and Spain's Andrés Gimeno the following month at the Stockholm Open.

Borg possessed a fiery capacity for the game. He was a player of immense athleticism and endurance. One day, aged 13, after travelling down to Malen in the southern part of the country where tournaments in all age groups were taking place, he stayed on the court for 11 hours: a mammoth stint during which he completed nine matches, reached the finals of five different classes and won the 14-and-under event. 'I'm glad Bjorn didn't play in the women's doubles,' his mother was heard to say. 'We wouldn't have had time for lunch.'

That capacity, though, often manifested itself in much darker forms – and led the youngster into all sorts of bother. So fierce was his will to do well, Borg was, to use his own words, 'crazy', 'a real nut case', completely

unable to keep hold of his temper on court. 'When I was young,' he recalled in a 1978 interview, 'between the ages of maybe 9 and 12, I would throw my racket, I screamed, I cheated.' He was, he said, 'hitting balls over the fence – everything'. The player's young friends might call him 'Nalle' for teddy bear (Bjorn means 'bear' in Swedish) but at times he was anything but cuddly.

Such antics left his parents so ashamed eventually they refused to attend any more of their son's matches. They'd done what they could to hand him some important lessons. Once when Borg pulled a tantrum in a match, his mother took care of the situation immediately. 'She took my racket away from me and locked it up for a month,' Borg remembered in 1981. 'She told me, unless I learned to control myself, I couldn't use it again.' The deprivation hurt. But still he struggled to stifle his anger.

He paid a price. The day following another outbreak of abuse – and racket hurling as he lost a quarter-final match at his club – someone called at the Borgs' residence to inform Margarethe that her son was being punished for his behaviour – the Swedish Tennis Association was suspending him for approximately three months. Borg was distraught when he heard. Living in such a small town, the news spread rapidly. 'People whispered behind my back about my being the "bad boy" of Swedish tennis,' he wrote in his book. In Sodertalje itself, they forbade him from practising at the club. They'd even wanted him thrown out for good. It was 'a devastating experience,' Borg said, that stung deeply.

It was events in 1972 that really provided the launching pad from which the youngster's life lifted off. In April, with the Swedish authorities' agreement and his parents' consent, Borg took his leave from Blomback school – quitting in the ninth grade, one semester short of the required period – to participate in the Madrid Grand Prix. The 15-year-old's decision made headlines around Sweden. Irrespective of the fact that he'd

begun to hate studying, Borg was dedicated to making a success of his tennis career.

Earning fortunes was never a motivating factor, but even at 15 Borg was well aware of how lucrative the sport had become, that riches followed wherever success went. He was said to have pleaded with his parents, 'If you let me leave school this term, I promise to make you both a million before I'm 20.' Borg desperately wanted to repay them for the sacrifices they'd made. (Much of Borg's first earnings from tennis – of more than \$60,000 in 1973 – went to buy a small local grocery store in their Sodertalje neighbourhood for Rune and Margarethe. They had always wanted to run their own business.)

The tournament was a decisive moment. After beating Italy's Antonio Zugarelli in the first round, Borg's victory over Jan Erik Lundquist, a Swedish tennis legend nearing the end of his career, qualified him for the Davis Cup team, which would face New Zealand in May. In Spain, Borg was knocked out in the next round by the Czech, Jan Kodes, but now had the chance to fulfil a dream he'd held for so long. The following month, in Bastad, a tiny seaside resort village of, at the time, around 2,000, on Sweden's south-western coast, and known as the Little Wimbledon of Scandinavia, Borg made his Davis Cup debut. Just shy of his 16th birthday and eight months past the age of the youngest-ever to compete in the cup, Haroon Rahim of Pakistan, Borg became the youngest player ever to win a match in the competition, triumphing over the experienced Onny Parun.

Two sets down to New Zealand's top player, Borg came back tenaciously to record a memorable upset. Under severe pressure, he'd held his nerve, displaying a remarkable calm for one so tender in years. In the decisive set, a bad call that he might well have questioned he simply let pass. He then beat Jeff Simpson in straight sets on the final day. At the end of the tie, the Swedish press hailed the youngster's display, declaring that he had 'is

*i magen* ('ice in the stomach'). No one had thought he would win either match. Now, in a land where Davis Cup was everything, Borg was arguably the biggest Swedish sports hero since the one-time heavyweight boxing champion Ingemar Johansson.

Borg regarded representing his country as 'a great honour'. His captain's advice to switch to a lighter racket mid-match had also played its part in his victory. That captain was a man 31 years his senior. A native of Alingsås, a city in Sweden's Västergötland County, Lennart Bergelin was an elegant, accomplished tennis player in his day, outstanding at doubles. Winner of 20 national championships (nine singles and 11 doubles), in 1948 he became the first Swede ever to win a grand slam crown, partnering the exiled Czechoslovakian Jaroslav Drobný to the French doubles title. In 1951, Bergelin won the German championships. His career saw appearances in three Wimbledon quarter-finals too. For eight straight years from 1946 to 1955 he was a mainstay of Sweden's Davis Cup team, winning 62 of his 88 rubbers, at one time leading his country to a famous upset of Australia in 1950.

Upon retirement in 1959, after a spell selling Lambrettas and Vespas in a Stockholm suburb, Bergelin turned to coaching. Taciturn, somewhat strict but also good-natured, the tall, balding Bergelin was an extremely shrewd figure who brought a wealth of knowledge to his tennis tuition. It was little surprise when, in 1971, the national federation invited him to become Davis Cup captain. He agreed, on one condition: that he could take the country's best young players around the world for six months of the year to gain expertise playing in international competition. One of his first recruits was the 14-year-old Borg, a player he'd originally encountered when the youngster, then 13, was losing the final of a tournament for which Bergelin was handing out the prizes.

Bergelin was another who'd recognised Borg's exceptional quality early on. He'd 'never seen such magnificent groundstrokes, or anyone

who moved so fast,' he said. Borg 'was dancing on the court, all the time'. Yet, at the Davis Cup training sessions, his relationship with the youngster might have been broken irreparably before it had even fully formed; what became a memorable weekend at Bastad was nearly ruined by one more Borg flare-up. During the try-outs for the team, Borg, losing a set in a match with Ove Bengtson, questioned three calls made by Bergelin who was officiating as the umpire. 'I even called him a cheat,' Borg admitted in *My Life and Game*, 'at which point Bergelin went berserk, pushing me over the courtside benches and hurling a racket at my head.'

From his chair, an infuriated Bergelin had first of all thrown down a box of tennis balls at Borg before the pair engaged in a vicious row. Borg quit the match in tears and refused to practise for two days. Man and boy did not speak to one another. It was Bergelin who took the flak, the press criticising him over what was deemed 'harsh discipline' and 'bullying' of his players. When Borg was named to face New Zealand, however, any complaints disappeared. The always pragmatic and rational Bergelin never fretted over the choice. 'Despite his young age, I simply didn't have anyone else,' Bergelin wrote some years later. 'He was already the best in the team.'

There were still times when the tiger got loose. 'I guess the 15th and 16th years are rough periods for succumbing to tantrums for many players,' Borg reasoned in his book. A month later, in the Championship Cup against Leif Johansson, Borg's rival neighbour from Sodertalje, Borg queried a call by stomping over to Johansson's side of the court and circling the mark on the clay where his ball had hit. It was captured by national television cameras. He lost the decision and the match, and his own reputation suffered again.

The press who'd lauded him for his coolness against Parun now wondered whether this was, in fact, Borg's true character surfacing. A genuine turning point had occurred, though. Not only had Borg been

instantly embarrassed by his conduct but, afterwards, he rued bitterly that it had so upset his concentration that it cost him the match. It was to be, as Borg later referred to it, 'the last real display of poor sportsmanship of my career'.

Their set-to all but forgotten, Bergelin effectively took Borg under his wing and took over as the youngster's full-time coach. It was an invaluable association. In the fullness of time, as their bond cemented, he would not just be Borg's trainer and physio but a friend, mentor, father-figure, confidant and constant companion, accompanying him to all the major tournaments, acting as a *de facto* agent, taking care of everything from Borg's travel arrangements to planning meals to sourcing practice partners (more often than not fulfilling that function himself). Most importantly, perhaps, he would perform the role of shield to Borg against an intruding world, providing a protective cocoon that allowed the player to concentrate on nothing else but showing up for his matches fit and ready.

Bergelin's influence was felt almost immediately. 'Early on,' Borg said of him, 'he taught me three rules: first, play tennis; second, eat well; third, live cheaply.' They were rules by which Borg tried to live from then on. Bergelin believed in old-fashioned values, like hard work and proper preparation. He instilled this into his young prodigy. A double dose of daily practice was demanded from Borg. A sensible lifestyle was encouraged. There would be no drinking, smoking, gambling. No special girlfriends. The youngster accepted that it was necessary. He didn't feel he was missing out. Tennis was his 'fun'. Gaining victories gave him the highs others found in less healthy activities.

His tennis improved and so did his temperament. What Bergelin did was set about channelling Borg's passion into winning instead of allowing him to waste it fighting a turn of fortune or against an opponent. Borg sought to mirror the manner of his childhood idol, the great Australian Rod



Laver. 'Rocket Rod', the little red-haired left-hander from Rockhampton, Queensland, had followed in the illustrious footsteps of countrymen Ken Rosewall and Lew Hoad to dominate tennis in the 1960s, with 11 grand slam successes just in that decade. Soon after he won Wimbledon in 1962, for the second year running, Laver joined the professional ranks, so the tournament was a no-go for the next five years. When he returned in 1968, in the first Championships of the Open era, he captured the men's singles title again, many regarding it an even greater achievement as he had to better all the pros this time. A fourth Wimbledon crown followed in 1969.

Laver played with a humility that made him eminently likeable. Though just 5ft 8in tall, the Australian was immensely strong with a bulging left forearm, and was a real fighter. But one of his greatest attributes was that he always focussed on the game. 'The next point – that's all you must think about,' he once said. 'I admired his concentration and straight face,' Borg would say. 'He never got upset.' So, under Bergelin's watchful eye, Borg set about adopting a similar attitude, above all cultivating the cold countenance that he'd endeavour to wear on court whatever fate may throw his way. Even if a stormy sea was raging within, on the outside only a glacial calm would show.

Like Drobny and Romania's Ion Tiriac, who had both started out on ice too – the latter representing his national team at the 1964 Winter Olympics – Borg had made the transition from ice hockey to tennis fairly easily. Strength and quickness of the eye were important in both sports. It was ice hockey, Bergelin reckoned, that toughened up Borg and made him such a strong figure on court. Borg's inner (rather than outer) aggression is what had first appealed to Bergelin. It was a quality the former Davis Cup player regarded as the most important – it controlled everything else in the game – but was one, Bergelin believed, that 'cannot be learned'. Borg had what Bergelin termed 'the right kind of courage'.

## The Golden Boy of Centre Court

That courage was never more evident than during the two weeks from 26 June – 9 July 1972, when Wimbledon got its first glimpse of Borg's precious talent. Competing for what was officially termed the Boys' Singles tennis title, Borg eased through four rounds of three-set matches to make the final, where he met Christopher 'Buster' Mottram (who'd squeezed past Vitas Gerulaitis in his semi-final).

The son of Tony Mottram, who represented England between 1947 and 1955, and later coached the national team, Buster was tall, powerful and fast on his feet, a stylish player with great technical control. He was rated by those in the know as his country's finest young prospect since three-times Wimbledon winner Fred Perry. Against Borg, 14 months his junior, after losing the first set 3-6 then taking the second 6-4, Mottram led 5-2 in the third and looked destined for victory on home soil. But the young Swede, again exhibiting traits that had been evident in Bastad, recovered from the deficit, winning five games on the bounce to dash the Briton's hopes.

Borg's name was posted on a winners' board at Wimbledon for the first time. The boy who, unlike many top players, hadn't been given a tennis racket as a substitute rattle had learned fast and matured swiftly. For someone who'd only been playing since the age of nine, he'd made astonishing strides in the game. But the craving for taking more was voracious. And after his success on that rather cool July day, his thoughts were already elsewhere. As the 16-year-old stared out from the staid old stadium on the outskirts of England's capital there was no limit to the horizons he had in his mind's eye.

## 25 June – 8 July 1973

ON SATURDAY, 23 June 1973, two days before the action commenced at the 87th All England Lawn Tennis Championships, a BBC Two preview show starting at 9.50 that evening saw bespectacled presenter Harry Carpenter and veteran tennis commentator Dan Maskell ‘assess the form and the prospects of the favourites’ heading into Wimbledon and also ‘look back at some of the great champions of recent years’. As part of the one-hour-and-five-minutes long programme they recalled, too, the previous year’s memorable final between Stan Smith of the USA and Ilie Nastase of Romania – ‘and who doesn’t want to see that again?’ asked *Radio Times* in its new issue.

However many might have wanted to, no one would be seeing it. Earlier that day, in brilliant sunshine, a sell-out crowd had jammed the Queen’s Club in West Kensington, London, to watch Nastase face Britain’s Roger Taylor, anticipating what they thought might well be the line-up for the Wimbledon men’s singles final a fortnight hence. The Romanian won 9–8, 6–3. Taylor, under normal circumstances, would have been far from favoured to reach the last two of the world’s most celebrated tournament. But normality was a ball that had long been slammed out of the court,

perhaps never to be found again, because in the early hours of the morning that Saturday, despite hopes that it still might be called off, a boycott of Wimbledon by 81 members of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) had been confirmed – the climax to weeks of bitter wrangling between the nascent players’ union and the International Lawn Tennis Federation (ILTF).

Its catalyst was a 33-year-old Yugoslavian named Nikola ‘Niki’ Pilic. The month before, Pilic, a muscular, lissom athlete whose best year at Wimbledon was 1967 when he lost a semi-final to Australia’s John Newcombe, the eventual champion, had allegedly refused to represent his native country in a Davis Cup tie against New Zealand, opting instead to play a well-paid doubles tournament in Montreal. Though Pilic denied the charge, the Yugoslav Tennis Association suspended the player from all international competition for nine months, a suspension upheld by the ILTF. He was also handed a lifetime ban from the Yugoslavia Davis Cup team. Although the barring from competition was then decreased to one month, until 30 June that year, it still prevented Pilic from playing at Wimbledon, due to commence on the 25th. The ATP, of whom Pilic was a member, contested the ILTF’s right to exclude a player without due process. Pilic, they claimed, had been unfairly treated. Ban the player, they said, and you ban the entire group.

The advent of tennis’s Open era in 1968, when grand slam tournaments agreed to allow professional players to rub shoulders and compete with amateurs, had spawned a period of great change and much turmoil. The emergence of rival circuits caused clashes of interest, the chief conflict taking place between World Championship Tennis (WCT), the Dallas-based promotion organisation set up by Dave Dixon (later succeeded by Lamar Hunt), to whom many of the top players were contracted, and the ILTF, which approved the Jack Kramer-conceived Grand Prix circuit.

With the national associations around the world (within the ILTF), along with commercial promoters, really making all of the decisions regarding who played where and when and for how much money, players were left straining for their rights. Nobody represented the male professionals as a group, so the ATP – essentially a union to protect players' interests – was formed in September 1972 at the US Open by former Davis Cup captain Donald Dell its lawyer, the ex-Wimbledon champion Kramer its executive director, and South African Cliff Drysdale its first president. The American player Arthur Ashe was installed as treasurer.

The ATP welcomed the spread of the game; what they wanted was for players to have a bigger share in its control. They proposed a new international council on which representatives of the ILTF, tournament directors, the players as well as sponsors would all be included and all have a say in how tennis was run. For too long, in their view, the existing national and international bodies had attempted to run the game along dictatorial lines; they were too autocratic, virtually ordering players to play at their whim. The basic grievance was that, while professionalism was accepted, the system was not geared to administer it. A more updated administration was needed to cope. The ATP considered the ILTF rules to be out of tune with the modern game – many had been written ten years prior during tennis's amateur days and were no longer relevant – including the one that compelled a man to appear for his country in the Davis Cup if he was selected: the rule that led to Pilic's ban.

The ATP's fight wasn't with Wimbledon. It just so happened that The Championships found itself slap bang in the middle of the acrimonious dispute. All England Club chairman Herman David was, if anything, sympathetic to the players who were standing behind one of their union members. On the Tuesday evening, in the week preceding Wimbledon, in protest at Pilic's exclusion, the ATP players decided to withdraw from

the tournament. A few days of intense efforts at mediation and wrestling with consciences followed but no settlement was reached, and a burgeoning crisis quickly came to a head.

Despite much debate and even the attempted intervention of Sports Minister Eldon Griffiths, after a conference at the Gloucester Hotel between ATP officials and many of the game's leading lights that lasted most of Friday night, any flickering hopes that a peace formula still might be forthcoming were finally snuffed out. At 3 o'clock on the Saturday morning, just seven hours before All England Club officials would sit down to study the entry list and make the draw, the ATP executive board, including Stan Smith, voted 6-2 for the walkout, confirming that 81 out of 84 of its members had signed a declaration not to participate. Their position was final and irrevocable.

Having originally accepted 112 players for the men's singles with 16 more places left open for the winners of the qualifying tournament going on between rain showers since Monday of the previous week, an alternative list of 128 was made up of the non-boycotters plus the hopefuls who entered the qualifying event. Dozens of lower-ranked players filled the vacated places; many who would not normally have got there in a lifetime of trying were now unexpectedly bidding for a sudden chance at fame, thrown into the hunt for a share of the £10,275 total prize money on offer. As one familiar name followed another out of the hat, it gave the tournament an unrealistic look.

Unsurprisingly, the Wimbledon organisers maintained a stiff upper lip. Despite the defections, they confidently expected the tournament to prove itself once again greater than the players. The previous year Wimbledon had managed without many of the big stars – the likes of top Australians, Newcombe, Laver and Rosewall – because of a dispute with WCT promoter Lamar Hunt, and attendances were the second highest in The Championships' history.

From the original seeding list – consisting of 16 seeds, instead of the customary eight, for the first time since 1970 – Stan Smith, John Newcombe, Arthur Ashe, Ken Rosewall, Tom Okker, Marty Riessen, Roy Emerson, Tom Gorman, Cliff Richey, Adriano Panatta, Manuel Orantes, and Bob Lutz were all now missing. Just four – Nastase, Taylor, Jan Kodes of Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Alex Metreveli – were left in a revised draw of only eight seeds.

Nastase, according to the *Evening Times*, had ‘elected to stay with tradition’ and ‘let his fellow professionals in the ATP seek their own salvation’. The truth, however, was a little more complicated. Nastase, as an ATP member, had firstly responded to the group’s strike call by withdrawing from the Wimbledon competition, but his decision to compete had been forced upon him – a letter from the Romanian tennis association in Bucharest brought an about-face; his government made it clear to Nastase that, while he was able to enjoy a home in Belgium (he had a flat in Brussels) and to play tennis all around the world, he was still a citizen of a communist country and he shouldn’t forget it.

Taylor, too, initially told the ATP that he would join the boycott but delayed signing the declaration form and confessed he was in an agony of indecision before finally, just as the draw was about to start, phoning tournament referee, Captain Mike Gibson, to say he would honour his entry. Taylor put his loyalty to his national association first. British tennis officials were jubilant over the decision. His playing colleagues not so. Taylor, in the company of his lawyer, had already been informed by ATP officials that should he defy the ban he would not be allowed to play in any of their tournaments again. Despite denials by Arthur Ashe of any attempts at coercion, the pressure on both Taylor and Nastase to not participate had been strong. Jack Kramer told the press that Taylor would have ‘nowhere to hide’. Nastase, Taylor and Australian Ray Keldie – the other ATP member



who'd defied the group's wishes – all faced disciplinary action following The Championships. (They were each later fined.)

Cliff Drysdale called it 'an all-or-nothing fight'. But the ATP soon came under criticism because of the strong-arm methods used by some players to persuade their fellow pros to join the walkout. There were reports of threats against those who refused. Inferences were made to younger players that, unless they withdrew, the ATP could make it extremely difficult for them to get to America and play under the group's umbrella. The following week, John Barrett would announce his resignation from the association because, while he agreed with all the ATP was fighting for, he didn't agree with how they were fighting. He was particularly incensed about alleged attempts to intimidate 18-year-old British player John Lloyd (which Kramer denied had taken place). Nastase, staying with his wife, Dominique, in a hotel occupied entirely by ATP players, had to check out, and moved elsewhere. The atmosphere, he said, was 'very unpleasant'.

Feeling in tennis circles and in the press was running high, with public sympathy against the ATP. Accepting 'it would have been embarrassing in the circumstances' to carry on, Kramer, unsurprisingly, gave up his job as a BBC television commentator, a role that had made him a popular figure for a decade. One London newspaper publicly invited him to 'go home' to the States, and the *Daily Express*, on the tournament's opening day, suggested he resign his All England Club membership, which he had held since taking the men's singles title in 1947. Writing in the paper, columnist Frank Rostron described the ATP 'militants' as 'flannelled fools who left school too early and have learned little from their world travels but the rotation of the tennis courts and the banks'. The *Sunday Times* called the ATP an undisciplined rabble. Kramer, they wrote, was a bully.

However, one journalist, the Australian Peter Thomson, sympathised with the boycotters, criticising 'an astonishing blindness on the part of the

amateur tennis officialdom, lawn tennis scribes and the public generally'. Statements, he wrote in *The Age*, 'carried the unfair inference that money is involved, and only money'. That wasn't at all what was at stake in Thomson's view. 'Just plain old-fashioned mutual respect and acceptance is what they asked for,' he believed. The pros who threatened 'one of the cherished institutions of the English summer ... have a wider view of the game and its progress or lack of it' than the 'people whose life centres around one London suburb.' Thomson wrote 'They have already left for other places. Wimbledon from thousands of miles away falls into its proper perspective.'

For one player, perhaps, the boycott couldn't have been more fortuitous. Less than three weeks after his 17th birthday, Bjorn Borg was not only playing in the senior event at Wimbledon for the first time but suddenly found himself seeded No.6, observers reckoning he must be the youngest-ever male seed since the idea of seeding was introduced in 1927. Already a household name in his native Sweden, Borg had fast established himself as one of the tennis personalities of Europe. After playing well on the Riviera early in 1973, reaching the final at Monte Carlo before losing to Nastase, the following month he'd taken another step nearer maturity and astonished experts by leaving in his wake an impressive list of victims at the French Open, the first grand slam tournament in which Borg had competed. On the way to the last eight the unseeded 16-year-old completely demolished Cliff Richey, a former US Davis Cup player, came from behind to upset French hero Pierre Barthes, and then outlasted another US Davis Cup star, Dick Stockton, before losing a rain-interrupted quarter-final to eighth-seeded Italian Adriano Panatta. The youngster had faltered at the Italian Open earlier in June only because he had to go to the dentist (handing a walkover to Jamaican opponent Richard Russell).

Generally accepted as the best junior tennis player in the world, Borg was now demonstrating he could hold his own in much older company.

Many of the world's leading tennis coaches described him as being more talented than either Lew Hoad (in 1953, the youngest player to be ranked world No.1, at age 19 years 38 days) or Ken Rosewall (only 18 when, also in 1953, he won his first singles title at a grand slam event, the Australian championships) were at the same age. Wimbledon, Borg had long stated, was the title he would like to win most. At 16-1, he was obviously a long shot but he wasn't without confidence – 'I play important matches very well,' he said. 'I play the big points well.' An outside chance or not, it was felt by many that Borg could turn out to be the main attraction of the fortnight.

With defending champion Stan Smith among the absent rebels, it was Nastase, the man whom the American beat in the previous year's final, who was immediately installed as a runaway favourite. The supremely talented but tempestuous Romanian was odds-on to become the first European in seven years to secure the title. That 1972 encounter, described by Dan Maskell as 'a see-saw struggle of complete opposites' – Smith, the lanky, 6ft 4in Californian from Pasadena, with the neatly trimmed fair hair and moustache, a quiet, calm man in complete control of his emotions, versus the short, swarthy-featured Nastase with his unruly mop of black locks and an explosive temperament – was hailed as the greatest final for 40 years, going the full distance before Nastase's artistic wizardry eventually succumbed to Smith's power-play.

Since his defeat, though, the Romanian's precise, lively tennis had secured him a first grand slam title, the US Open at Forest Hills when defeating Arthur Ashe; then successes in Paris (beating Pilic in the final) and Rome had solidified Nastase's reputation as the world's best on clay. Shot for shot there wasn't a more stylish player anywhere. On form and concentrating hard, he was almost unbeatable. Nastase, wrote Bill Brown in the *Evening Times* in 1972, 'has the sort of genius that can suddenly blossom like an orchid'.

Unfortunately, he also possessed a persona that often withered, whatever gifts he had. Russell Miller, in a *Radio Times* Wimbledon preview, described Nastase as ‘completely unable to treat the tennis court with the required degree of holy reverence’. He was ‘an incorrigible joker, a gentleman prepared to use every trick in the book’. Those ‘tricks’ – patently questionable forms of gamesmanship that he freely admitted he employed to needle opponents and break their advantage – were always unpredictable and invariably infuriating. Constantly falling, or turning his back and shouting, ‘Stop, I’m not ready’ precisely at the moment an adversary was about to serve, or outrageously mimicking his opponent’s stance, were just some in the irrepressible Romanian’s bag.

Off the court, Nastase was so nice and polite, butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. On it, that mouth was often expletive-filled; sudden and vicious outbursts were common. He’d bicker with linesmen and umpires over what he felt were incorrect decisions, engage in loud and vociferous arguments with cameramen, even direct insults (and sometimes tennis balls) at spectators. His nickname ‘Nasty’, though affectionately given him by his fellow pros, wasn’t just a derivation of his surname – it was apt. Not for nothing was he also labelled ‘the Beast from Bucharest’ and ‘Ilie the Terrible’. Nastase said often that he had no time for losers but, all too frequently, if the player’s opponents were not good enough to beat him, he did it himself. His volatility continuously put him in the bad books of the tennis establishment and, the feeling was, it was preventing him from realising his full potential.

With such a weakened field at Wimbledon, it was considered the golden chance of a lifetime for Nastase to underline his tennis supremacy. For all the talent that was missing, once the tarpaulins were rolled back, the tournament still got underway in what the *Glasgow Herald* termed ‘the spacious, flower-decked precincts of the All England Club’ with all

of the ritual that made it so unique. The blue-and-crimson hydrangeas were potted in window boxes, the cucumber sandwiches neatly cut, the strawberries and cream paired up again for their annual outing as a doubles team. With seats for Centre Court and No.1 Court sold out in February, months before Pilic's ban, both courts were packed well before the first ball was struck.

When Nastase took to the immaculate new turf for the opening contest, baking sunshine – with a cooling breeze – and a standing ovation from a capacity confetti-coloured crowd greeted him, the applause led by the Duke and Duchess of Kent who, in a rare exhibition of regal solidarity, stood up in the Royal Box as he entered (though, post-match, the player confessed 'I was too shy to look up', so missed the gesture). And, after the poisonous atmosphere of the previous few days, the match provided a successful antidote. The grass was slick and so, for the most part, was Nastase. Though perhaps apprehensive about his future, he produced some sparkling tennis, hitting winners when he most needed to and quickly seeing off Hans-Joachim Plotz, 6-3, 7-5, 6-2.

Plotz, an energetic little West German, had opened the previous year on Centre Court, too, against Stan Smith, from whom he got just five games. He fared a bit better this time, but was no match for the Romanian who graced the sunlit afternoon with a show of delicate strokes – precise cross-court shots, deft lobs and wickedly top-spun backhand volleys. A fitting repayment for the ovation accorded him. 'It was as if I were winning Wimbledon,' Nastase said afterwards of the marvellous reception.

If anything, Roger Taylor's welcome as he entered the arena was even more rousing – 'positively celestial' wrote the *Daily Mirror's* man – the royal duo rising once again for an ovation that lasted several minutes as what the *Glasgow Herald* called 'a wave of defiant patriotism' swept through Wimbledon. Hailed in the press as a national hero, Taylor, who'd borne