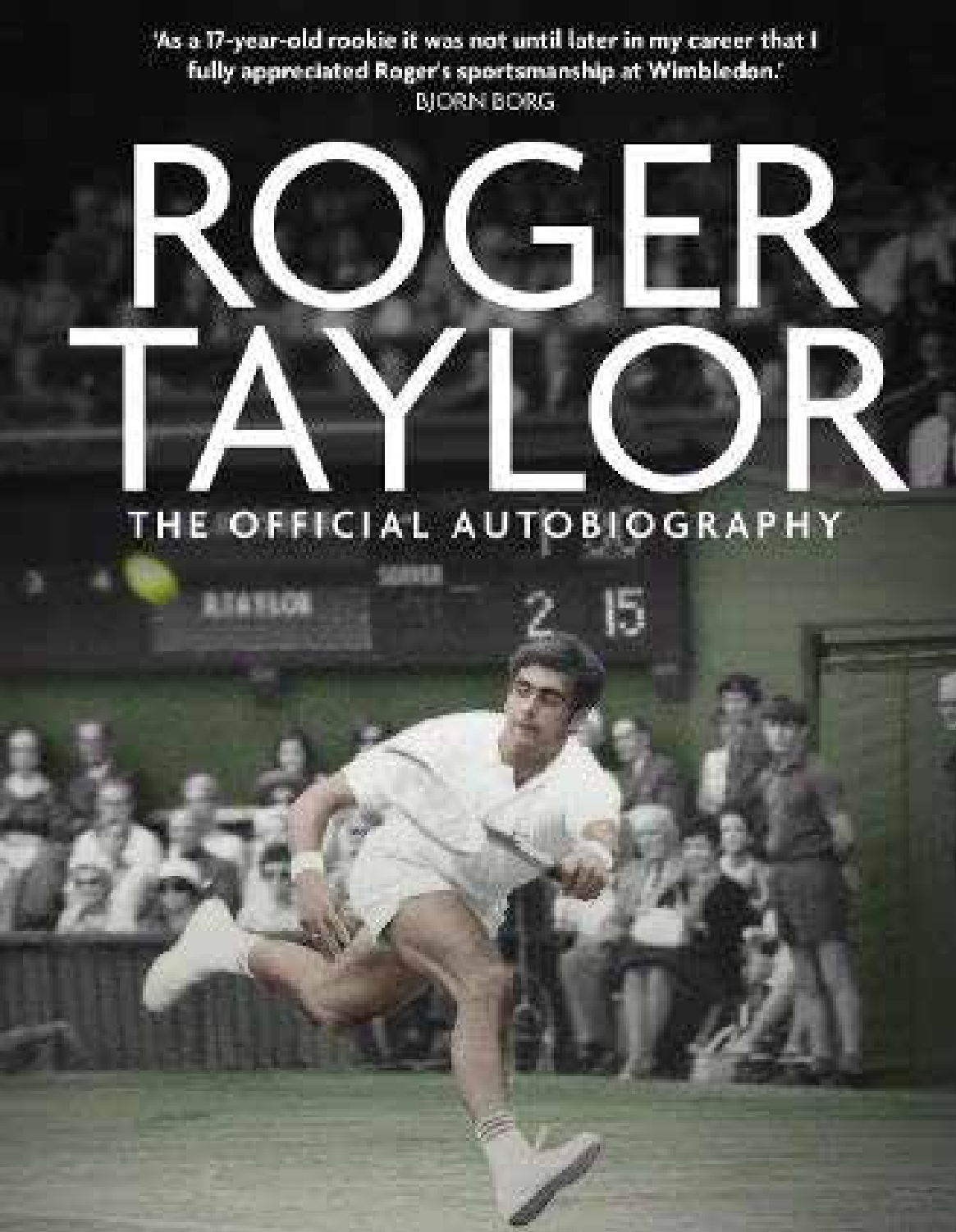
'As a 17-year-old rookie it was not until later in my career that I fully appreciated Roger's sportsmanship at Wimbledon.'
BJORN BORG

ROGER TAYLOR

THE OFFICIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY



THE MAN WHO SAVED WIMBLEDON

With Marcus Buckland

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Prelude – 1973

IT WAS Stan Smith who delivered the threat. Big Stan, all 6ft 4in of him, with long blond hair and a bushy moustache. A man who'd already reached the top of the tennis tree and would go on to become even more famous for selling his Adidas shoes around the world. And who looked as though he'd happily kick me where it hurts while wearing a pair of them. Looking me firmly in the eye I could sense the fury churning inside him.

'Roger, you'll never play tennis again if you don't join the boycott.'

Message received. Message understood. Message most unwelcome. This was rapidly turning into a very ugly fight.

He wasn't joking. But neither was I. I'm not one to seek confrontation. Never was, never will be. But I've always been my own man, which has meant doing, and saying, what I feel is right, irrespective of the consequences. And that meant there was no way I was going to be bullied into submission.

The Wimbledon boycott was a nightmare vividly brought back to life when I walked through the gates of the All England Club in the summer of 2023, the 50th anniversary of a controversy that came close to splitting tennis in two.

Oh, and it was also the year I really should have won Wimbledon. Should have, could have, but for, if only. Don't worry, this isn't going to be a sob story, but it's time to get a few things off my chest.

Chapter 1

5 July 1973, Wimbledon Semi-Final. Roger Taylor v Jan Kodes (Part A)

THERE'S NO point denying it. I'm nervous. Ridiculously nervous. My mind keeps playing tricks and my stomach won't settle. Stick to the usual routine everyone says. It's just another match.

It's not, though.

It's a semi-final at Wimbledon. Another semi-final.

I've lost two of them before but, in the face of so much adversity, here I am again. And, despite all the turmoil, there's the backing of a success-starved nation. You can do this, Roger, they all say. Of course you can.

Of course I can.

But the doubts persist.

I've stuck to the routine as closely as possible. The house is full but breakfast nice and quiet. Toast and coffee plus a couple of eggs. A quick glance at the papers. My face plastered over the back pages. There's a lot on the match but I put them back down. Don't want to be distracted. Then the drive to Queen's Club. I live in Wimbledon but warm up at Queen's. Always have, even before the falling-out. I feel more valued there, having made the final twice.

It's all a bit of a blur. I go through the motions. Try to loosen up and focus on the game plan. Concentrate on what I'm good at and where he struggles. It lasts about an hour. Back in the car the traffic is surprisingly light. We're through the barrier at the All England Club in double-quick time.

And into the spotlight.

Photographers are waiting. A camera crew is recording everything. Relax, Roger, or at least try to. The entrance to the locker room is only a short walk away. Bag on shoulder I shake hands with a few well-wishers and smile. Do my best to look calm, almost nonchalant. Then I head inside. To where I am now. Sitting quietly. Trying to control my breathing. Trying to forget what it's all about. What the last two weeks have been all about.

Chapter 2

Life in a Northern Town

IN MANY ways it was a miracle I ever played at Wimbledon at all. My parents were competitive people but didn't know much about tennis. Don't forget that, born in October 1941, I was growing up during the post-war era in an area far removed from the manicured lawns of SW19.

Mum and Dad were as supportive as possible without realising what I was doing, and was potentially capable of going on to do. It was only after I became British number one and reached those three Wimbledon semi-finals that my mother expressed regret.

'If only we'd known how good you are.'

I will never forget her saying that. Can't blame her, though. I didn't know how good I was and had no real way of finding out.

In all my years as a player I didn't have any coaching. None at all. As a youngster, aged around 14, I did once have a 'hit' with a Yorkshire coach called Michael Evans but nothing developed from that and I had to learn everything by myself.

In the early days I'd play with my mum, Lilian, regularly. She loved the game and knew how to hit a ball. That's how I developed a technical understanding of sorts and an appreciation of what the sport was all about. We'd practise in one part of Weston Park with my father, Mark, a couple of hundred yards away in the lower park playing bowls. He was pretty good and wanted to win but didn't approve of the perhaps overly competitive spirit that clearly bubbled

inside me. I used to get very angry when I didn't beat my mother and he'd tell her not to play with me if I was going to behave like that.

Dad worked three different shifts for British Steel; mornings for one week, afternoons the next and then nights, in a constantly repeating pattern. In those days your mother looked after home life while dad took care of the finances. I don't want to sound like a stereotypical Yorkshireman from a certain generation complete with cloth cap and lots of 'eee by gums' but the world was very different back then and certainly a lot less complicated.

I had, and still have, one older sister. Vivian was born 14 months before me. We lived in Bromley Street, Sheffield, a road very similar to one made famous by the *Coronation Street* soap opera. Demolished many years ago, there was a bombsite just around the corner, and the house was a two-up two-down, with a passage that led to the bottom of the garden and an outside toilet. Very basic, but it was a simple, happy life. I'd run out to play after school every afternoon and evening, usually on what was called 'the tip'. Football was, inevitably, the main sport. I was pretty good and, like most active kids my age, wanted to spend as much time as possible out and about, often hiding in the bushes when mother came looking to bring me home for a clean-up before tea, which would precede what became our regular hit on the tennis court. I always had to have a clean face and neck before we could set out for that.

My sister and I were lucky to have such a wonderful upbringing and we remain close to this day. There was always a sense of fun in the house and no shortage of love. Mum and Dad had met at school and were so happy together. You'd hear her singing in the kitchen as they did the washing-up in tandem, after which the door would open and they'd come into the living area, often dancing a waltz and having a giggle. Then they'd sit down and hold hands, a picture of contentment. Arguments were almost unheard of. They had the most loving, caring and respectful relationship and knew exactly how to bring out the best in one another. If there was an

issue, it was quickly resolved, usually with a touch of humour. Dad was very slow to fit a new sink once, which started to infuriate my mother. 'That's it,' she said eventually, 'I've had enough of this. I'm off!' She was joking and we all knew it. Dad went upstairs and came back down with her suitcase. 'It's all packed,' he joked. 'Off you go and good luck.'

That type of good-natured ribbing served them well for decades. Mum lived to the age of 95, Dad to his late 80s, and they never changed. Not the sort to hang around in the local pub, drinking beer and having a gossip, they'd be quick to take us out if anything notable was going on, particularly to sporting events like a Test match, the football at Bramall Lane or international table tennis, whatever was happening in the area. We were rarely left at home and it felt great to be part of such a tight-knit family.

I was quite a cheeky so-and-so growing up. Mum was always chasing me around the house while trying to get me to do this and that. I'd joke that she could never catch me but I was also careful not to take things too far. Vivian learnt to play tennis as well but was more into her dancing and went to a dance academy for a number of years, where she excelled. We may not have had a lot of money but we were better off than many others, with nothing to complain about. Mum was so talented. She was an outstanding swimmer in her youth, an indication of the sporting genes running through the family, and was also a fabulous seamstress. She made some beautiful wedding dresses and ballroom costumes and her determination to succeed in a number of different areas was reflected by the manner in which she taught herself to play tennis. Wanting what was best for her family, she went the extra mile to help us on our way.

My first racket, given to me aged around eight or nine, was a Grays with nylon strings. I was desperate not to break it. Luckily that was nigh-on impossible because it was like a fishing rod. I'd just stand around watching whoever my mum was playing plus anyone else on the adjoining courts and copy what I saw, good or bad. Most

of them were pretty unorthodox with their approach but, employing some logic and common sense, certain tactics and patterns of play began to form in my mind. There were no magazines to study, no YouTube to turn to, absolutely no points of reference at all, other than what was going on in that park in South Yorkshire. It was a case of making do or buggering off to try to become the next Sheffield United centre-forward. United, not Wednesday of course!

There was one guy with a big three-piece design racket which was meant to maximise power and control. His name was Barney Rosen and he was THE man to watch in the area. God knows how he even lifted that bloody racket, it was so heavy. But I eventually started to compete against this unique group of individuals in the park, having developed a set routine with my mum every night after school. We used to head up to the park with some honey sandwiches she'd made and hit for as long as we could before it got dark. During the winter that would be around 20 minutes max. My plan of attack was always to be sensible when it came to shot selection but, naturally as a youngster, I also wanted to hit the ball as hard as possible. Slowly but surely, blessed with a fair degree of natural ability, I started to improve.

Mum was inspirational and arguably the player I've admired more than anyone else. Passionate, enthusiastic and very hard-working, I owe everything to her and vividly remember the day she became Sheffield Parks champion, which was a sought-after title in the area. It was brilliant and demonstrated to an impressionable, sports-mad youngster that anything was possible. Funnily enough there was quite a big crowd milling around the place that day, though not to see Mum in action. Behind the court was the main London to Scotland railway which the *Flying Scotsman* operated on. Invariably at weekends there'd be a fair few trainspotters taking notes and they were out in force, oblivious to a moment of sporting folklore in the Taylor family. I must confess to turning my back on the match and running up to the fence when the most famous train of that era

flew by in the blink of an eye. Other than that moment, though, I watched the entire match and developed a 'lucky' single clap for every winner she came up with.

It does make me laugh when I see how today's youngsters come through the ranks with talent ID, county training, constant one-to-one coaching and all the tournaments that are run pretty well by the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) at junior level, even if it's a costly exercise for the parents involved. We knew nothing about junior tournaments as I grew up and there was no mini-tennis with red or orange balls to help facilitate the start of the journey. Nowadays, if you haven't begun to develop your technique by around the age of six or seven, you're already playing catch-up. Only a few notable exceptions, such as Kyle Edmund, wait until they're ten or 11 before taking it seriously and then go on to make an indelible mark.

A brick wall next to the reservoir was my only hitting partner away from the courts. If I missed that, I had to climb over an iron fence and retrieve the balls from the water. Hardly glamorous but I was a determined little so-and-so and knew no better.

Gradually, I started to get noticed and heard about some tournaments in the area. Buxton was, I think, one of the first places I competed at in my early teens. Then there was Bradford and eventually the Yorkshire Championships at Scarborough. That led on to the North of England Championships, also staged in Scarborough, which was the sum total of my circuit. I never travelled south to places like Norfolk and Tunbridge Wells, which I heard lots of people talking about. They sounded like locations on a different planet. We didn't have a car. Every journey was by bus, often two or three of them at a time, so it was a mission to make relatively short journeys.

By now, though, the bug had bitten, big time. I started to play some titanic county matches, more often than not in the wet and the rain, for Yorkshire against Lancashire. These were hard court

winter singles. I started off as the lowest listed player at number six but didn't take long to climb the ranks.

From there we moved on to County Week, which Yorkshire had never won, after which I was included in the squad for an amazing 'Whit' tour trip. That really opened my eyes as it took me to London for the very first time. We stayed at the Strand Palace Hotel and thought we were in wonderland: the lights of the city, the glamour and plenty of fancy food. There were matches against Oxford and Cambridge and, most significantly, the All England Club. Amazing!

A few years ago, I spoke at the members' autumn dinner at Wimbledon. One of the older guests introduced himself and started reminiscing about this young, dark-haired Yorkshireman from that week all those years ago who'd serve four double faults immediately followed by four aces. He was quite right. I was so rough and ready but clearly had a lot of potential. These days, youngsters can attempt to mirror their heroes. I was copying what I had seen in the park and, not surprisingly, a lot of it was rubbish. There was no coach to tell me anything constructive (or destructive) but I had a visual understanding of what could and should work for me. It was fairly basic common-sense tactics but having a clear picture in my mind enabled me to develop an increasingly reliable game plan. Some people can't see it. For whatever reason, the pictures elude them, but they were crystal clear to me, which was a gift.

By now I'd developed a close friendship off court, and a successful one on it, with Dickie Dillon, who also came from Sheffield. Dickie was the same age and we were both taken on that trip to London to gain some experience and keep each other company alongside the older players. In truth, we were only there as back-up reserves and didn't have any real idea how to be effective as a doubles team. But, following some poor results by the seniors against Oxford and Cambridge, we were thrown into action and decided to lob like crazy. Hit it high and, if they got it back, lob and lob again. It worked.

We won a couple of matches and the county hierarchy started to take proper notice of us. By now I was also playing a few senior tournaments and giving a pretty good account of myself against some of the best players in the region.

Shortly after that excursion a fellow called Bert Bishop approached my mother. His son also played and he was quite influential on the local tennis scene. In sporting terms, Sheffield, as you may know, is divided between the Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield United ends of the city. There were a couple of courts in a club situated in Wednesday territory where another mate, Bob Hill, who I'm in touch with to this day, lived. Bert ran various events there and knew people. He obviously saw something in me that he liked despite the eccentricity and naivety of my game. I didn't have much of a serve for a long time and there was no logic to the way it developed. I was a lefty despite doing everything else right-handed. It just felt natural and that was it. But I continued to build on what I had, not what was lacking, and it finally started to get me noticed with those who had some influence.

By the mid-1950s my game was good enough to see me qualify for the Junior National Championships, which were held on the outdoor clay courts at Wimbledon. Having been knocked out in the first round in 1955 I made the semis 12 months later and the final in 1957. Mike Harvey, who I recall came from somewhere near Birmingham, beat me that year but I was still young enough to play again in 1958. Except that I forgot to enter in time! You had to send your application in three weeks before the tournament but, for whatever reason, my letter arrived a day late and the LTA refused to listen to my pleas for leniency. I even persuaded Bob Hill to write to them and say it was all his fault and that he'd forgotten to post the letter in time but it made no difference. I would have been hot favourite to win that year; another one that got away! The only consolation was that I decided to go and play an under-21 event in Eastbourne instead and managed to win that.

In my mid-teens and off the back of some other impressive wins, I was invited on to an LTA course at St Faith's school in Cambridge. It was run by national selector Dan Maskell who went on to become a household name through his television commentary for the BBC. Tim Phillips, later a chairman of the All England Club, was also there along with a number of other young protégés. To be honest, the coaching was limited and it was all pretty basic stuff. I really could have done with a proper backhand and probably should have been taught a new grip, which I never actually changed throughout my entire career.

Ahead of a serving practice session Dan asked us all to put our rackets down and throw some tennis balls as far as possible to test our strength. I threw the first one a heck of a long way into the balcony, at which point he said that was enough of that and we moved on to something completely different! I threw it right-handed so God knows how he was able to make any evaluation about my service technique!

What I remember most about that week was the presence of some LTA councillors, most of whom looked as though they were in their 80s and enjoying a nice little jolly. We'd have a sweepstake each evening to predict which one would fall asleep first during dinner. One of them always did! Now 80-plus myself, I feel a tinge of guilt about that!

As underwhelming as the experience was from a learning perspective, it felt good to now be a 'nominated young player'. I certainly wasn't out of my depth on court and, having had a taste of life at that level, wanted more.

There wasn't to be another opportunity, though. Back I went to Yorkshire to hone my skills, hoping I'd be invited to train at Queen's Club during the winter, which was the prize for the country's top juniors. The offer failed to materialise and I never received another invitation from the LTA. What I didn't know until after she died was that in November of that year my mother wrote to the secretary Basil Reay asking whether I could be part of the winter squad. He

replied saying they didn't feel I had made the necessary progress, thank you very much and goodbye.

The bottom line was that Dan, the national selector, didn't appear to rate me. To him my game wasn't of the 'Oh I say, what a peach of a shot' level, which was desperately frustrating from a personal point of view because I was never given a proper opportunity to demonstrate what I had and find out what I needed to work on to make real progress. Of course, that happens to so many players not blessed with a perfect set-up, week in, week out, year in, year out. There are coaches standing next to greatness who often can't see past their own shoelaces. You need a really good, driven coach and supportive parents with an ability to appreciate what's inside a player and what is required at each step of a horrendously complicated and long journey to have any chance of getting somewhere.

Dan had been a professional ball boy at Queen's and was part of the establishment there. When, a few years later, I did begin training at Queen's on a regular basis, I realised there remained a hierarchy dictated by society. A few of the lads from Fulham, who I became friendly with, would have coaching roles with the members (some of whom were limited in terms of ability, to say the least) and, while practising on one court, you'd hear things like 'lovely shot, my lord', and look across to see the coach giving you the wink while trying not to fall about in hysterics. It was an amateur set-up open only to the chosen few.

It's so easy to fall by the wayside in your mid-teens as a player. These days the little funding offered to promising youngsters is normally taken away at 14 unless they are one of the 'elite'. My determination and belief allowed me to deal with the tough times and keep coming back for more, supported by two brilliant parents, but I understand why so many youngsters turn away from tennis before they've been given a proper chance to see what might be achievable. It's such a waste and the LTA should be ashamed of a system that lets so many promising youngsters drift away too soon.