

Part X1 - Great Champions

In this final chapter, I talk very briefly about some of the great champions of the game of tennis that have not so far had much of a mention. There have been so many great players over the years and I'm sure that we all have our favourites. Here are some of mine:

Billie Jean King

Billie Jean King, the daughter of a Californian fireman, has been called "the most dynamic and prolific winner ever to play at Wimbledon." Starting in the early 1960's she competed for just over 22 years and captured 39 Grand Slam titles, including all four singles crowns. Her record in the development of women's tennis is unmatched and she remains deeply involved in the sport as captain of the US Fed Cup team and is also a respected commentator.



Martina Navratilova

I feel as if I have watched Martina playing tennis for most of my life. In a poll of BBC television viewers held during 2003 she was chosen as Wimbledon's greatest ladies singles champion and was far ahead of her nearest rival, Steffi Graf. She became the oldest Grand Slam champion at 46 years when in 2003 she won the Wimbledon Mixed Doubles title with Leander Paes. This victory meant she equalled Billie Jean King's record number of 20 Wimbledon titles. With a total of 58 Grand Slam titles, I reckon that she must have the biggest trophy display cabinet of all the players.



Steffi Graf

German born Steffi, came onto the Grand Slam scene in 1983 aged 14. She went on to reign as world number one for a record of 377 weeks and in total won 106 tour titles. She was named World Champion by the International Tennis Federation on seven occasions, another record. Steffi Graf married Andre Agassi in October 2001 and gave birth to their son later the same month.



John McEnroe

Most people, even if they are not tennis fans and even if they are not sporting fans, would know of this man. McEnroe, the great entertainer, won his first of three Wimbledon titles in 1981 and still entertains us either from the commentary box or on the veteran's tennis circuit. Rivalries are a key part of any sport and I can remember only too well that of McEnroe versus Borg. Just the ingredients for a great tennis match, Mr FIRE versus Mr ICE.



Virginia Wade

As the last Brit to win a Wimbledon singles title, I just had to give a mention to Virginia Wade. Virginia won the US Open in 1968 and the Australian Open in 1972. In 1977, Wimbledon's centenary year and the Queen's Silver Jubilee year, she won the Ladies Wimbledon title.



Pete Sampras

Pistol Pete, I have to admit is my champion of champions. He won 14 Grand Slam Titles in all, seven of them at Wimbledon between 1993 and 2000. I count myself as one of the lucky one's to have sat courtside and witnessed the passion and genius of this man. Outwardly he appeared as cool as an Ice-Borg, but inside him raged the fire of McEnroe that burned so brightly that it scorched all who crossed him on the tennis court. The 1999 Wimbledon final between Sampras and Agassi was a wonderful well fought display of grass court tennis. Agassi after the match said, "*Today Pete walked on water.*" Sampras said simply, "*Sometimes I surprise myself.*" He took the Wimbledon title with a second service ace.



Who Next?

I do believe we are about to witness the greatest tennis champion of *all time* in the genius of Roger Federer. At this year's Australian Open, Federer outclassed Marcos Baghdatis in an exciting four set final. Despite Roger not playing the best tennis of his life in this tournament, I think that most of us always felt that it was only ever going to be Roger's name on that Australian trophy.



In my youth, tennis was very much a 'white middle class' activity and over the years the game of tennis has evolved and made its contribution to breaking down social, class and nationalistic barriers. Today, tennis is a world-class competitive sport captivating millions of players and fans all around the world. A constant programme of tournaments and events take place throughout the year and top players have become the sporting icons for a new generation. As you would have read in Part 1, something that was once a pastime for only the Kings, has now developed into a sport for all.

Finally I'll leave you with the words of a great champion of the late 60's and early 70's, John Newcombe. "*Tennis at the end of the day is just a game, and it should only be played because of one's love for the game.*"

Joe Rylett

References: Ace Magazine Planet Tennis Wimbledon Website
Tennis's Strangest Matches – Peter Seddon Tennis4all.com
Players web sites