

Part V - A British Tennis Super Star is born.

Once upon a time there was a British tennis super star..... No, this is not a fairy tale!

His name was Fred Perry. Fred, the son of a Labour Member of Parliament was born in the northern town of Stockport and came to the game of lawn tennis via table tennis, at which he was world champion. He wasn't from a privileged background, but he won Wimbledon three successive times in a row, helped Britain to four successive Davis Cup triumphs, turned professional, become Champion of the world, made his fortune and later through B.B.C. broadcasts, become revered as 'the voice of tennis.'

His first attempt at the Wimbledon title was in 1929, a month after his 20th birthday, when he was knocked out in the third round. By the next year he had improved enough to become the fifth seed of the tournament, but this time he was knocked out in the semi-finals by the eventual champion, Sidney Wood.

By the time the 1934 Championships arrived, Fred was already the star of the British Davis Cup team and was going into Wimbledon as second seed behind the Australian, Jack Crawford. The final was an anti-climax as Fred routed Crawford 6-3, 6-0, 7-5, at one stage reeling off 12 games in succession. The unhappy Crawford double faulted at match point and gave Fred his first Wimbledon victory.



Fred Perry and Jack Crawford

The same year Fred went on to win the US Championships. In the following year 1935, he regained his Wimbledon title and also went on to take the French title. In the quarter finals of the Australian Championships of the same year, Fred met his old rival, the Italian Giorgio de Stefani. To date, Fred had never been able to beat his old rival, but this time Fred had done his homework and came up with a game plan. In the quarter finals in Melbourne on Wednesday 9th January 1935, Fred thrashed Giorgio 6-0, 6-0, 6-0, so I guess the plan must have worked.

His defence of the Wimbledon title in 1936 turned out to be a lot easier than his last two Wimbledon championships. Fred went into the semi-final without dropping a set in the previous rounds. Only in the semi-final did Fred drop a set to the American, Don Budge, before coming up against the German aristocrat, von Cram in the singles final. Fred had always made a job of 'scouting' the opposition and this time he learned from a Wimbledon masseur that Cram had been treated for a groin strain and was having trouble stretching wide on his forehand.

After an opening game which went to 24 points and had 10 deuces, von Cram started to crack as the champion piled the pressure on his opponent's forehand. It was all over in 40 minutes, 6-0, 6-1, 6-1, the fastest Wimbledon men's final of the 20th century.

If you visited Wimbledon during the Championships last month, did you take a close look at the statue of Fred. If you did, you may have seen a ghost of a smile on the great Englishman's lips. The smile is very well merited as Fred was unique in Wimbledon's rich history. The first Englishman for 25 years to capture the men's singles championship. He took the men's title in straight sets in three consecutive years. But alas back in 1936, the last British man to hold the championship trophy aloft. So come on Andy Murray, there's a challenge for you!! Andy is sponsored by 'Perry' tennis sports wear.



Fred Perry's statue

The 1930's was a boom time for tennis but all this would come to a sudden end in 1939.

Dateline: 3rd September 1939, the Surrey County Ladies Single's final was taking place this morning. As the final was being played, the British ambassador in Berlin was handing the German government an official note stating unless they confirmed their willingness by 11.00am to withdraw their troops from

Poland, a state of war would exist between England and Germany. The Ladies Final progressed and at 11.15am the prime minister, Neville Chamberlain broadcast to the nation those famous words, "I have to tell you that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany." At this time Miss Vera Dace was just one game away from clinching victory as the sirens sounded the outbreak of war. The nation had been instructed by the government to go directly to the shelters immediately the alarm sounded. However, the umpire in true British bulldog spirit said, "Play will continue." Vera won the game and tournament, had a cup thrust into her hands by a county official, and they all took a dive into the nearest air-raid shelter. She remains the only player in LTA records to have started a final in peacetime won it during wartime.

When the war ended in 1945, a new breed of player was ushered into the game of tennis.

Next Month : Part VI - The New Breed.