

Part VIII - Tennis goes OPEN and produces one of the greatest matches of all time.

The Wimbledon Committee for some time had been contemplating opening the Championships to professionals as well as amateur players. At the beginning of 1967 they decided to test the water and hold an eight man Wimbledon World Professional Championship on the Centre Court during August of that year. Rod Laver won the title. Towards the end of 1967 the Lawn Tennis Association voted for open tennis across the board and within a matter of weeks the whole world of tennis was ready for the change. The very first Open Tournament was played on April 22nd in 1968 at the British Hard Court Championships at the West Hants club in Bournemouth. Ken Rosewall beat his fellow Australian Rod Laver in the final and he went on to repeat it a few weeks later in the final of the first French Open.

Now, the swinging 60's were my teenager years and when I think back to this time, I conjure up a whole multitude of memories from this period. Kennedy assassinated, Great Train Robbery, Churchill died, Aberfan Disaster, man on the moon, England win the football World Cup, Beatles and girls wearing very short mini skirts, are just a few of them. Another major memory of mine was the witnessing at first hand, what many fans of the game regard as the greatest match of all time, played out in the 1968 Wimbledon Championships.

The approach of Wimbledon's first Open Championships in 1968 was hot and humid. This was not a good sign because conditions like this normally resulted in heavy rains. This is exactly what happened and the first week was one of the wettest in the entire history of the Championships. The first Monday was washed out, but on the Tuesday there was a routine first round match between the old master, Pancho Gonzales and his young protégé, Charlie Passarell. Puerto-Rican born Passarell, was a muscular 25 year old who in his junior days was coached by Gonzales. Play commenced on Centre Court about 6.30 pm on 24th June. Gonzales from 5-4 down in the first set served to keep the set alive 18 times, saving 11 set points before losing it, in very poor light by a remarkable 24-22. The tie-break had yet to be invented. I recall quite vividly, spectators on the outside courts only having eyes for the large score board mounted high up on the outside of the Centre Court. It was now 9 o'clock and it was becoming quite gloomy so we all thought the tournament referee Mike Gibson would call a halt of play for the day. What with the loss of play on Monday the committee were trying to make up for time so play was told to continue. Gonzales expected, just as we did, play to finish for the day and appealed loudly to the umpire: "How can I play when I can't see?" Gonzales, a giant of a man paced his Base line in the dimming light giving the air of a great Aztec god. He lost the second set in 15 minutes, 6-1. Play recommenced the following day at 2pm with everybody's expectation that the young Puerto-Rican would finish off his old coach. However the older man had an inner strength and determination that reached out and could be felt by not only the crowd but also his opponent. Gonzales won the 3rd set 16-14, Passarell feeling the strain of this mammoth match, finished the set with two double faults. Gonzales cheered on by the crowd took the fourth set 6-3, Passarell again, finishing with a double fault. By the final set the older man was looking quite spent, yet the quality of play remained remarkably high. Eventually Passarell led 5-4 and forced his one time mentor to 0-40 on his own serve but two Passarell lobs inches out and an ace saved the two match points. Seven deuces later it was 5-5. Passarell held his serve and at 5-6 and 0-40 down on his serve Gonzales looked out of it yet again. Just one point for Passarell would do it, but a smash, an angled volley and a big serve got Gonzales off the hook yet again and by now the crowd had become near hysterical. After five and half hours play over two days, Gonzales clinched the match by winning the final set 11-9 on his first match point. He won a most remarkable match 22-24, 1-6, 16-14, 6-3, 11-9, that went into the Wimbledon history books for the record number of 112 games played in any given match. After the excitement of just this first round of the first Wimbledon Open, the fans gave it their instant blessing. Open Tournaments were now here to stay.

Next Month : Part IX - Loser takes all.