

Now and Then

A Return to Roland Garros
by David Lott, C'72

A few months ago I attended the French Open in Paris. As I sat in the stands watching Rafael Nadal defy age and injuries I reflected on the last time I had attended the storied tennis tournament. It was 1983, the dawn of today's professional game — the year Frenchman Yannick Noah won his only Slam title with a wooden racket in what was that historic material's last hurrah. Chris Evert took the women's crown for her 15th Grand Slam title, and her fifth French Open win.

I was then executive editor for *World Tennis* magazine and the previous November I had covered the conclusion of the U.S.'s successful Davis Cup campaign in Grenoble — the two events forever embedding in me the hook of clay court tennis in France.

Covering tennis in the 80s was a dream come true. It was a golden age for the players and the writers who covered them. The big money on the pro tour was new and growing every year and the tennis stars seemed larger than life. Billie Jean King had led the women in the fight for financial parity; Jack Kramer who popularized the Big Game (serve and volley) and ran the pro tour in the 50s was still pulling strings. Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors captivated the world with their rivalries, while Evert, Martina Navratilova and Tracy Austin led the women.

As a top editor for *World Tennis* I was involved with the planning and execution of the monthly issues and went out on tour for the bigger events. It was an opportunity to meet with our contributing writers and get the roar of the greasepaint, smell of the crowd, sense of the tour, and be away from the corporate offices in New York.

Former player Gladys Heldman started the magazine in the 1953 from her home in Houston, Tex. and later sold it to CBS. As a junior player, I had ball-boyed for Arthur Ashe and grew up reading about him in the pages of *World Tennis*. Writing about him and his colleagues for that same publication was a dream come true.

The writers at the majors were the all-stars who grew in stature with the game — Bud Collins and Lesley Visser of the *Boston Globe*, Neil Amdur of the *New York Times*, Herbert Warren Wind of *The New Yorker*, Barry Lorge of the *Washington Post*, Mike Lupica of the *NY Daily News*, Gene Scott and Richard Evans of *Tennis Week*, Sally Jenkins, wise-cracking Curry Kirkpatrick and legendary Frank DeFord of *Sports Illustrated* who wondered how good the angry Jimmy Connors could have been if he had learned how to take love on the rise. And there was our own Steve Flink, the amazing statistician who I predicted in 1981 would make it to the Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I., and made me a prophet when he was admitted in 2017.

The press box was always a wonder to me. I can still see Collins and Lorge sitting and staring at the words they had just typed on their tiny Olivettis and reaching forward with a pencil to scribble a change. The sound of all the typewriters clicking, clacking and ringing at once created

an urgent and intense electricity that rose and fell as each writer got closer to deadline and the speed of their typing accelerated. The big, bear-like Lorge was usually the last to leave, rushing to the phone, shirt tails flying, to call the story in.

At the French Open the sun would set close to 10 o'clock, pushing the writing late into the night. We often went out to dinner after midnight in a large group, sitting at a long table at a hot new spot on the Left Bank.

This was the world I wanted to return to for the 2022 French Open, although it was absurd to think that I could so easily travel back in time. But I had promised my French-speaking sweetheart that I would one day take her to Paris and the dream of attending the French Open still lived with that promise.

We rented a two-bedroom apartment just a short walk from Roland Garros. It was so close that, when we weren't at the tournament, we could sit out in the garden at night and hear the roars erupt from the stadium. We sat in the nosebleed seats at Court Philippe Chatrier, the 15,255-seat stadium showcase and sat in exclusive courtside box seats on the same court two nights later. We bought French fries, crunchy ice cream bars on a stick, and souvenir hats, as well as shirts and towels at La Grande Boutique. The baguettes and brie of yesteryear were harder to find.

We cheered for the French favorites as the call *Allez, Allez, Allez!* would ring out through the stands, and watched Rafael Nadal under the night lights on Chatrier crush the hopes of a French crowd, but fulfill the dream of a young Frenchman who got to play against the idol of his youth and win some memorable points that would live with him forever.

It was a long way from the first red clay court I had ever seen. I was five years old and the court was right in my own backyard. Every spring my father and I pulled out of the garage the bright white lines rolled up like bandages, the carefully put-away net and the boxes of nails that we used to hammer down the lines. A heavy roller that clanged like a church bell was pushed back and forth across the court by my father who would be bent nearly double over the handle and plodding along as if behind a plow.

Once the nails were down, I'd use a broom to brush the lines, creating a white path that gleamed in the sun in sharp contrast to the brick-colored surface of the newly laid-out court.

Yes, I was here in Paris, but it was still a little bit like home. With me, too, was my father, along with Bud, Barry, Frank, Arthur and many others. And that made it all the sweeter.