

Ye Olde Town Tournament

It's summer in America when private courts become public property, and local pride inflates the community chest. *By Wayne Kalyn World Tennis Magazine - August 1983*

Don't go to Princeton, Massachusetts, if you want a good stiff drink, a fast meal, the air-conditioned distraction of a shopping mall, or anything else resembling a mildly stimulating twentieth-century night on the town. Princeton is a hushed bedroom village of 2,400, some 45 miles west of Boston that keeps itself deliberately sleepy. In this residential slice of green, studded with turn-of-the-century homes painted New England white, your face is your ID, better than a driver's license and credit card. There is only one zip code in this town, not a single traffic light, and crime no more serious than an occasional fender bender.

On Labor Day, while three-quarters of America scratches and paws its way to sea sides, lakesides, and mountainsides in a last-ditch effort to squeeze a little more summer out of the season, the Princetonians - obeying their contrary



In Princeton, Mass., it's doubles with familiar faces.

yet charming logic - stay put on their front porches awaiting the inevitable flood of family and friends. There are hayrides, church socials, endless draughts of cool mountain air, about 12 hours of sunshine a day, pie-eating Tennis in Princeton was imported contests, dunks for apples, and night-square dancing. Townsfolk stroll "It's easy as pie," and "Hi, Henry, how are the sheep?" But the centerpiece of this deep-dish American gothic is the Princeton Labor Day Tennis Tournament.

Called the **Chandler Bullock Memorial** event - after the longtime townsman and president of the State Mutual Assurance Company - the tournament, in its 72nd running this year, is older than most of the world's "traditional" events and almost as venerable as the surrounding Massachusetts hills, about which John Greenleaf Whittier sang ample praise.

Tennis in Princeton was imported by the summer visitors in the early 1900s. Boston merchants, lawyers, around saying and Protestant clergy, among others, traveled in great numbers by train to Worcester and then took the bone rattling "democrats (stage coaches) to Princeton Depot, filling up the nine grand hotels that once crowded the

town common. Brochures at the time stated the town promised "health and quiet, a plateau where one surveys the high seas of the firmament." The automobile eventually killed Princeton's tourist trade, and all of the hotels suspiciously burned to the ground. But some of the summer visitors became year-round residents and thus tennis was etched into village life.

Anyone who fancies himself a player and who lives in "fair Princetonia" (or through a fortunate fate is staying in town as a house guest) can enter the mixed doubles, as well as the men and women's doubles. Duos are created through Russian roulette: Names are pulled out of a hat and inserted into the draw. In years past, as many as 150 game souls have entered the draw. Last year yielded a smaller crop of 82. The tournament is played on seven clay courts, manicured more by nature's whim than human hand. Four are public (that is, the Princeton public) and three are privately owned and attached to magnificent homes that flank a sheep pasture or horse farm or patch of forest. Play begins when it begins. Players congregate at the courts around 10 A.M. and finish up at dusk, but competitors are mutually agreed that the rules can be bent.

Although many of Princeton's denizens are white-collar professionals who commute to nearby Worcester, this isn't an upscale crowd, the demographic babies of some advertising agency. These folks are the grassiest roots of them all. Once winter is ripped from the calendar, rackets - usually one per customer and strung with un-chic nylon - are yanked out of mothballs, tennis clothes are hastily pieced together like patchwork quilts, and life is measured in break points and tiebreakers.

"The nice thing about playing this tournament is that you're not only making history by adding on to it, you're preserving it by remembering it," explained George Parker, the former president of the New England Tennis Umpires' Association, whose capable hands helped shape the event. Sadly, he passed away several months ago, but his avowed sense of familial commitment continues. "Whole families have won and lost in this event. The Shaugnessy family had six of their clan playing at one time. All of our lives are wrapped up in the tennis," Parker noted at last year's event.

Last year Princetonians made longwinded pilgrimages from Holland, the Virgin Islands, California and Wisconsin. Some traveled lesser distances from Boston and New Hampshire, but not without pangs of conscience. The Perry's, for instance, gave up box seats to a Boston Red Sox contest; others passed up a trip to Italy and Denmark. "Labor Day is a bigger than Christmas around here," said Alfred Gibson Whitney, 75, the elder statesman of the draw.

The tennis, it must be said, is passionately mediocre, but still a bargain considering the heavy volume of back slapping encouragement and fair-minded words exchanged among competitors. Nary a protest of line call is heard.

"With the Snappers flowing (a local concoction of Bloody Mary mix liberally laced with gin) and the parties raging every night," explained, tournament director Marshall Greene, who lost in the semis after he pulled a muscle in his groin, "it's hard to take the tennis as if it were Wimbledon. But it's certainly nice to win just to have the bragging rights of Princeton for a year.



Al Whitney, who played baseball at Harvard and semi-pro ball for 20 years and who has entered every tournament since 1931, gracefully exited in the second round, but made his patriarchal appearance at all of the matches. "My legs are becoming a little more wooden each year," he said, standing straight as a New England maple.

"I'm playing against kids I remember as babes in arm. But I would never want to play patsies."

Bill Davis, a 10-year-old hopeful the sprout of the event -sported a green baseball cap and left summarily in the first round. "You can get nervous out there. When you play in front of what seems like the whole town, it's hard not to be." Bill and Al were consoled by family and friends, along with periodic visits to the lemonade stand, which bulged with hometown desserts and other picnic cuisine.

On the finals day last year – with a Rembrandt-like light filtering through some ancient oaks - the big crowd, somewhere around 200, measured their turf and unfurled blankets, towels, and jackets for courtside seats on - the lawn. The men's final, the magnum opus of the weekend, pitted a lawyer and vegetable farmer against a ski instructor and a manufacturer of wooden bearings. Year. During play - which peaked and valleyed as it did all week - children romped and shouted loud nonsense, a midnight black Labrador curled up into a cozy circle on the court, and an occasional hawk dived earthward for closer inspection of the proceedings. The match went three grueling sets and the Snapper barrel had almost run dry. Crowds were silently hoping for a quick

resolution so they could start their extensive partying. The competitors complied and the silver trophies (in memory! Chandler Bullock, as everything in this event seems to be) were awarded and undoubtedly set down on mantelpieces about town. The season was over but the memories, one was told, blaze on until this September. Chandler Bullock's words came to mind: "The Princeton Tennis Tournament is over. The throngs of players and their friends no longer haunt the tennis courts. The echoes of the applause of the crowds have drifted away with the breezes that vitalize our Princeton slopes. So until next year, farewell Princetonians."