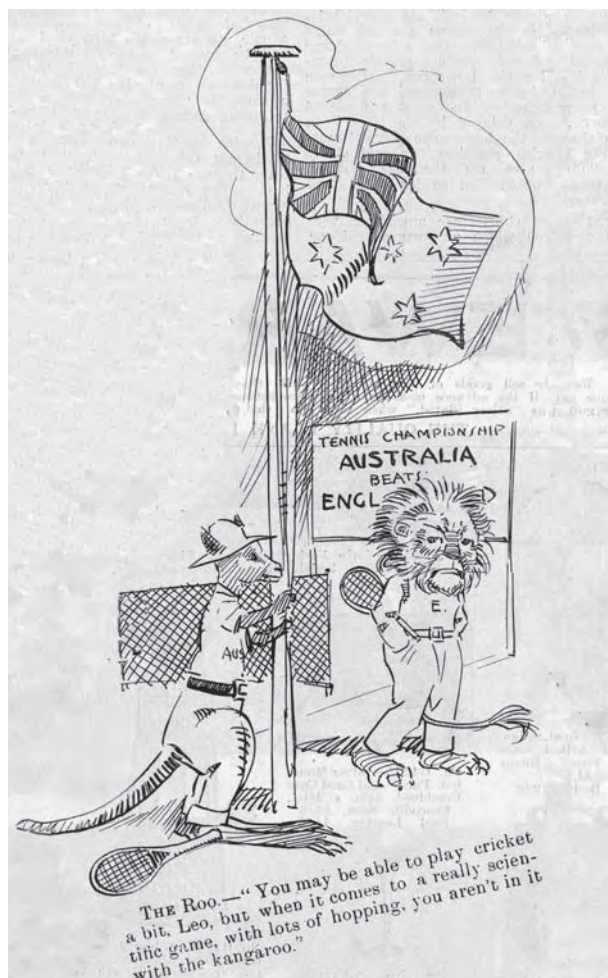


A Very Serious Occupation

Tennis and Our First Davis Cup Win



Ian Warden describes the personalities and game of the men in the winning Australasian team at their first Davis Cup held a century ago

One hundred years ago, on 1 August 1907, Melbourne's *Punch* magazine published a cartoon in which a smug tennis-playing kangaroo (representing Australia) scoffed at a disconsolate tennis-playing lion (representing England). 'You may be able to play cricket a bit, Leo', the kangaroo conceded as it hoisted a proudly fluttering Australian flag to the top of a flagpole, 'but when it comes to a really scientific game with lots of hopping, you aren't in it with the kangaroo.'

Every reader knew that what the patriotic marsupial was rejoicing about was Australasia's victory over England at the really scientific game of lawn tennis in the Davis Cup final that had just been played at Wimbledon on 20, 22 and 23 July. Australasia's team of Australia's intense, undemonstrative, attacking, left-handed, invincible-seeming Norman Brookes and of New Zealand's young, dashing, and gorgeously athletic-looking A.F. (Tony) Wilding (female fans were sometimes reported to weep over Wilding's defeats) had just beaten England 3-2.

This first Davis Cup victory was a defining moment in Australian sporting history. One hundred years later, Australia's success at the Davis Cup is legendary. Australia has won the ornate trophy (donated as an International Challenge Cup in 1900 by wealthy American tennis enthusiast Dwight F. Davis) 28 times and only the United States of America has won it more often, with 31 victories.

But Australia's flattering tally of 28 finals wins includes the four won while we were, with New Zealand, the team from Australasia. Although the *Punch* cartoon didn't acknowledge New Zealand's part in the glory won at Wimbledon, Tony Wilding's role was indispensable. Australia did not become an independent competitor in the Davis Cup until 1913, winning it that year.

Fielding a joint team was not a demonstration of antipodean colonial camaraderie but a reflection of the fact that Brookes and Wilding, both wealthy men, were able to afford to do a lot of travelling and to spend a lot of time overseas doing almost nothing but play tennis. Wilding, already based in England, having gone to Cambridge University, shimmered here and there on the continent playing in tennis tournaments in fashionable places and so was at hand to rendezvous with Brookes at Wimbledon in 1907.

But after the 1907 Davis Cup triumph, a columnist in *The Bulletin* grumbled that it seemed a shame that 'lack of money [had] prevented an absolute Australian

left:
Unknown artist
'You may be able to play cricket a bit, Leo ...'
reproduced from *Punch*,
1 August 1907
(East Melbourne: John Joseph Halligan, 1900-1920)
Newspapers Collection NX 104

below:
T. Humphrey & Co.
Mr Norman E. Brookes, Victoria
c.1907
reproduced from *Newspaper Cuttings* album in the Papers of Sir Norman Brookes (1877-1968)
Manuscript Collection MS 2979

bottom:
Lafayette
Mr A.F. Wilding (New Zealand)
c.1907
reproduced from *Newspaper Cuttings* album in the Papers of Sir Norman Brookes (1877-1968)
Manuscript Collection MS 2979





above:
Unknown photographer
Anthony Wilding and Norman
Brookes 1907
reproduced from an untitled
album in the Papers of
Sir Norman Brookes (1877–1968)
Manuscript Collection
MS 2979

below:
Unknown photographer
Norman Brookes (Australasia)
Beating Gore c.1907
reproduced from an untitled
album in the Papers of
Sir Norman Brookes (1877–1968)
Manuscript Collection
MS 2979



representative going to partner Brookes', requiring him to be partnered instead by 'a Maorilander'. The National Library of Australia has the Sir Norman Brookes' papers, consisting almost entirely of burly albums of press clippings of stories and press photographs of his playing career. They include, for the year of 1907, clippings that follow him from the first ball he hit in practice after his arrival in England in May to the last ball he hit on 23 July, the last day of the three-day Davis Cup final.

Some things about the game of tennis as played in 1907 seem quaint to us now. Gentlemen dressed like cricketers and played in long-sleeved shirts and long flannel trousers (no man played tennis in shorts until America's Bunny

Austin took this great leap for mankind in 1932). Brookes, fastidious about most things, seemed always to have taken pains with his on-court appearance. At a valedictory dinner for him in the mid-1950s, Robert Menzies recalled going, as a boy, to watch Brookes and noticing how the great champion was always 'immaculately attired' with his long trousers 'always more beautifully pressed than I have ever been able to get mine done'.

Then, too, players of 1907 came to the court with only two racquets (modern players may have 20) and those racquets were sturdy wooden instruments that looked like the workmen's tools of trade they were, strung with animal gut as thick as twine.

But then some things about the tennis of 1907 seem utterly familiar today. They include the fact that tennis courts were exactly the same size and shape and, to judge from contemporary accounts, the fact that the best players, men like Brookes and Wilding (and in spite of their being gentleman amateurs), were committed, tense, focused and driven, and more hungry for victory than the men who could not match them. The two seem always to have been unimpeachably sporting but ravenous for victory in ways that strike the modern reader and tennis aficionado as quite contemporary.

'Watching this stern-jawed, imperturbable Colonial [Brookes] on court', a contemporary tennis writer thought that 'the onlooker might well get the impression that he never thaws—that life to him is a very serious occupation, trimmed with no frivolity or romance'. Robert Menzies, in the aforementioned speech, remembered the 'lack of superficial emotion' in Brookes' steely on-court manner. Another writer noticed how when a Brookes serve came back over the net:

like a tiger springing for its prey, he [Brookes] springs for the ball ... His eyes are never off it. There never were eyes so bright and keen, there never were limbs more agile—the ball must be 'killed' when it comes.

English onlookers of the 'I say! Anyone for tennis?' school, feeling that tennis players should have oodles of spiffing fun and not worry about vulgar things like winning, found the colonial couple a trifle earnest. Tony Wilding was a more genial and gregarious man than Brookes, but he too was famously competitive once he got on court and together they made an earnest team and doubles pair.

And in the English summer of 1907, both men were in *deadly* earnest. One English newspaper columnist, surveying the players of the world arriving in the country for that summer's tennis, noted that while lots of the fun-loving players:

find champagne a splendid tonic and stimulant to good play, Mr Norman Brookes and Mr A.F. Wilding, the Colonials who intend to strive for the Blue Riband at Wimbledon this year, consider that to drink alcohol in any form prior to a match is a mistake.

Another columnist marvelled:

They rarely touch wine of any sort and never before an important match ... Nor, by the way, do either smoke. To celebrate a victory when the work is done they might drink half a glass at the evening meal, but to ensure a victory their view is that alcohol is a mistake.

Brookes and Wilding seem to have had levels of determination unusual in amateur athletes of their time. There's a fascinating story told in A. Wallis Myers' biography of Tony Wilding of how, in 1908 and with the Davis Cup now to be defended in Melbourne against the Americans, Wilding moved in with Brookes

on the outskirts of Melbourne for what sounds uncannily like the kind of rigorous pre-finals training camp professional athletes sweat and strain through today. Wilding told his biographer that the 1908 'daily programme' was always 'faithfully fulfilled' (and carried out in hot November weather). It is exhausting just to read about. It began at 7.00 am with a walk and some running and was followed by several sets of singles in the morning then several of doubles in the afternoon interspersed with lots of stroke practice and 'special attention' to anything that had seemed imperfect.

Wilding reminisced:

Skipping, running or a little game with the [practice] wall ended the athletic day. Two baths and a good deal of massage and to bed at 10.15. As a rule we drank barley water [though] sometimes a little light beer was consumed.

This Spartan regime paid off, just as the shunning of champagne and all alcohol (and cigarettes) had paid off at Wimbledon the previous year, with Australasia retaining the trophy in the narrowest of victories over the Americans.

In the relentlessly rainy English summer of 1907, both of these men (Brookes, 29, and Wilding, 23) seem to have been utterly committed. Brookes, the pillar of the team and with a game built around an intimidating serve (excited tennis writers credited Brookes with an ability to make his serve 'kick' and 'swerve' and even take a 'reverse twist' or 'zig-zag') won the men's singles and, with Wilding, the men's doubles in the Wimbledon tournament that preceded the Davis Cup matches. Then over three days in mid-July, Australasia beat the USA in the Preliminary Tie, which decided which of them would challenge England, the holders, in the final, then called the Challenge Round.

Tony Wilding lost one of his two singles matches in the Preliminary Tie and then one of his two in the Challenge Round (he had a wild colonial side and a fall from his motorbike between matches during the Challenge Round was said not to have helped his form), and he and Brookes lost the doubles rubber in both matches but, at singles, Brookes was unbeatable that summer. He won his two singles against the USA and then his two against England. He seemed so superhuman that even when the Challenge Round stood at 2-2 and, with

Brookes' match against the plucky but hapless Herbert Roper Barrett due to decide things, no one in the, by now, morose English press showed even a glimmer of optimism. And sure enough, Brookes, more attacking and more scientific than Barrett and perhaps outhopping him too, won 6-2, 6-0, 6-3. 'No other result has been expected for months past', the *Morning Leader* moaned the next day, deploring 'the loss of the treasured trophy to the colonies'.

At a dignitary-enriched dinner in his honour at Melbourne later that year, Brookes was referred to deliriously but correctly as 'the champion lawn tennis player of the world'. The next day, the press reported that 'The great Davis Cup was resting on a table before them', Brookes having brought it home among his baggage.

'Norman Brookes, in winning the lawn tennis championship of the world, has done much to advertise Australia', the Lieutenant Governor Sir John Madden enthused, and another speaker, caught up in the delirium of the occasion, gushed and punned that the champion Victorian Australian had achieved 'a second "Norman" Conquest' of England.

IAN WARDEN is a Canberra-based writer with a background in newspapers



above:

Unknown artist
'Australia First!'
reproduced from *Table Talk*,
1 August 1907
(Melbourne: Maurice Brodzky,
1885-1939)
Newspapers Collection
mfm NX285

below:

Bowden Bros.
*The Great Davis Cup Double at
Wimbledon, 1907*
reproduced from *The Story of
the Davis Cup (The International
Lawn Tennis Championship)* by
A. Wallis Myers
(London: Methuen & Co., 1913)

