

Tennis

Recently, I had the opportunity to try a sport known in the US as “tennis.” It’s quite an intriguing and enchanting little game, so I’d like to lay out barest history, accoutrements, and visceral nature of the experience.

The Basics

Tennis is a game for an even number of players (2 and 4 being most common, though several gripping 0-player matches have made headlines). Each player needs a “racket” (so named for the noise it makes when one smashes it to bits in anger), and the players share a single 6.7cm diameter ball, composed primarily of felted rubber and dyed the brightest yellow-green one can legally manufacture.

The game is played on a court. Championship matches are always played on the royal court, attended by one senior member of the royal family, but league play may occur at the residence of even minor nobility. In recent years, parks have been commissioned, nominally under purview of local Barons and Viscounts, for the sole purpose of increasing venues of play. This has proved quite popular with the citizenry and many municipalities now provide courts funded through local tax measures.

The court is longer than it is wide, with a net crossing the width and rising from the court surface to a height of 0.914meters at center and somewhat more at support beams. The court itself may be constituted from clay, concrete, asphalt, acrylic, or grass-covered earth.

Regardless of surface, the objective is the same: the player must hit the ball over the net in a manner so that the other player is unable to strike the ball back before the second bounce. The bounds of play are marked with paint by a series of inter- and over-lapping rectangles upon which the ball may strike with impunity.

History

Scholarly works on the game will indicate its origins in the late 19th century in England, but that’s simply when the rules and conventions became standardized. At its heart, the sport of tennis is the sport of one-on-one combat, and its origins in recorded history can be traced back to the Roman Coliseum. After advent of firearms, the gladiator running to impale an opponent with a sword necessitated transition. The running was maintained, but the sword dulled, and the target, rather than a slave’s head, changed to a lifeless ball.

As deaths declined, so did crowds, and the age-old practice of running and hitting might have been lost if not for a young upstart Duke named Marlborough Augurio Tennis. Wealthy and arrogant, he stole the game’s design on a trip to France, patented it in England, secretly constructed thousands of courts across the nation, and then announced a series of games so decadent and thoroughly debauched that the nation of England, and in fact most of the UK, today is still in a state of reserved shock.

Further refinement to the game came in the 1930's as hostilities between England and Germany were reaching peak. Churchill challenged Hitler to a game of Tennis to settle the war without loss of life, and the two sides spent weeks negotiating the rules before it was revealed Churchill planned to shoot Hitler before even beginning the game. The story gained notoriety, and the complete set of rules was published in Churchill's famous account of the war, *Nazi's: Bad but Beaten*, and became an international sensation. Had this great statesman acted with more integrity, millions of lives might have been spared. However, we may not have this great sport today, and most agree it was worth the cost.

Manner of Play

Tennis begins with the player holding the ball standing just outside the bounding rectangles, at furthest distance from the net. The player must coerce the ball into travelling, without striking, nudging, or nuzzling the net, into the opposing rectangles. Afterwards, the ball may glance or kiss the net as it pleases, so long as it travels over.

Only the player serving the ball may score a point. Failure for the server to score a point results in serve changing to the opposing player who may then score.

The ball may only be struck by the racket, never the hand, foot, face, or buttocks. Any of these constitutes a *fault* (such as a foot-fault, a face-fault, etc.) which relinquishes the faulting player of either serve or point.

Once a player scores a pre-determined number of points, he or she is said to have won the *game*. It's worth noting that scoring does not rise through the natural numbers, but increments to certain levels which may be referred to, by knowers of chemical bonding theory, as point-states.

The lowest point-state, at which both players begin play, is not known as zero but as love. This is a modern variation of the ancient Roman tradition of gladiators starting each death match with a long deep hug and the statement "I love you so much." Once they start slicing at each other, the love is gone and the next point-state is 15. That's followed by 30, then 40.

Once a player reaches point-state 40, his or her next point wins the game, unless the other player is also at point-state 40. Then the states become entangled and play continues until one has the equivalent of a two-state advantage. Thus ends the game of Tennis.

After a pre-determined number of (non-tying) games, the player is said to have won the *set*. After a pre-determined number of (non-tying) sets, the player is said to win the *match*. This continues through *contests*, *competitions*, *trials*, *provings*, and finally, the player wins the *challenge*.

In modern times, most challenges are resolved after twenty- to thirty-thousand individual serves. The most common method of ending a Tennis challenge is for one party to forfeit from exhaustion, which requires total unconsciousness for a period of at least ninety seconds.

Championship play sees higher priority on showmanship with most world-ranked players bringing their personal hydrationists, fashionistas, falconers, and notaries. A sufficiently spectacular

display may result in the king disavowing a tie and instead awarding a half-point state sufficient to win as much as a set.

Illegalities

As any game with winners and losers, the rules have been shaped by complaints from losers that the strategy by which they were defeated is too clever and they deserve compensation for their shortcomings. So while winners were off charming supermodels and racing their sports carriages, losers were hiring each other for desk jobs and banning the best tactics of the winners.

So before you think your novel method of winning is guaranteed, take heed of this list, though in-comprehensive, of infractions.

- Tackling another player is not only grounds for dismissal, but wildly impractical given the mean separation distance and net. Still, it's often attempted.
- Throwing your racket (racquet, in France) at the other player, and missing, is completely banned in every version of the game. However, throwing your racket (racquet, in France) at the other player, and hitting, is completely banned as well.
- Adjusting the rectangle boundaries to provide the opposing player a limited striking window is not an automatic disqualification, but the crowd is allowed to pelt the player with rotten fruit (in the case of amateur play) or neodymium magnets (for championship play).
- Shooting the other player results in a lifetime ban and charges of murder or attempted murder in most nations where Tennis is played. (See notes about Churchill and whiny losers, above.)
- Catching the ball and hiding it in one's pants for return once the opponent's back is turned was a very popular strategy until it became well-known. Now, with advent of electronic recorders and challenges, it's nearly impossible to get away with. Nevertheless, it is still banned.
- Strangely, being genetically superior, despite being by far the most widely-acknowledged best strategy (a strategy which permits simply no defense, given the other limitations), is not disallowed in any modern nation.
- Using performance-enhancing compounds such as oxycodone, Nyquil™, and vampire dust, even to compensate for genetic inferiority, is strictly banned (though not enforced in amateur play hint hint).

Conclusions

For its wonder and captivating nature, Tennis is referred to often as "The Sport of Kings" though, since the late 1990's, women have also been allowed to compete. In the opinion of this new Tennis fan, if some cool spring morning you're possessed with an abundance of energy and desire to hit something, you should heft your bundle of rackets, find a good-natured partner, and head to the court. Just be careful, unless you want to win, not to take steroids beforehand.