

# American Golden Set

Tilden and Budge were masterful tennis players, but they were also gentlemen who elevated the game by their good grace.

By Jeffrey Hart

BILL TILDEN did not just stroll into the West Side Tennis Club, he swept down the hallway that entered the main lounge and dining room like a large wave rolling toward the beach. Sometimes he wore a camel's hair topcoat, sometimes a bulky tennis sweater. Often one of his arms would be wrapped around half a dozen tennis rackets. Well over six feet tall, he had a long face, a wolfish grin, wide shoulders, narrow hips, and long, especially long legs. As he advanced down the corridor—"Hello, Freddie, sooo glad to see you," "There you are Emily, beautiful as ever"—his casual possession of the club not altogether welcome to many members, he strode past all those photographs of old champions—William Larned, Maurice McLaughlin, "Little Bill" Johnston, Helen Wills, Don Budge, Alice Marble—including his own photograph, with the dates of his seven national championships listed below it. He had won his first national championship here in 1920 when he was 27, then six more, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, and 1929.

Those who had seen both Tilden and Don Budge at their best could not decide who was the greatest in the history of the game. Budge was the first to win the "Grand Slam," as it then became called, a term derived from bridge. He had won the championships in Australia, Paris, Wimbledon, and Forest Hills, all of them grass, except at Roland Garros, where the courts were crushed

red brick. One day I happened to enter the pro shop, and whom did I see but Budge himself, with his racket in a vice on the workbench. He was putting strips of lead around the head of his racket, which was already a monstrous club with a grip of at least 5 inches. Budge had an arm about as big as my leg. "Why are you putting lead on you racket?" I asked. "It puts punch in my volley," he said. Punch in his volley. He must have dug divots in the grass courts outside. Budge had won one of the most famous matches in history, his Interzone Davis Cup match in 1937 at Wimbledon against the German champion Baron Gottfried von Cramm. Hitler arrived from Berlin just before the match. The baron went up 4-1 in the fifth set, both players at their peak, making twice as many winners as errors. Budge finally prevailed 8-6 in the final set, hitting a diving passing shot down the line against Cramm—and though lying stretched out on the court, unable to see if the shot had gone in, knew from the roar of the crowd that it had. Many people remained in the stands silent for an hour after the match, and Tilden himself said it had been the greatest match he ever saw.

Tilden often gave the junior players good advice, though one of my coaches said, "Stay away from that bastard." I had heard he was a homosexual, but I didn't know much about that. Oscar Wilde, I suppose. Maybe it was an English thing. Once I had a sore elbow, with a tournament coming up. "Play right

through it," Tilden said. So I did. Early in his career he had lost the top joint of a finger on his playing hand, and it hurt every time he hit the ball. But, seven championships.

Tilden had lots of great stories. "Once, when I had to play Lacoste," he said, "the French froze the balls." "Froze the balls?" "Yes. Lacoste invented the ball machine, and when you were playing him it was like playing the machine. The French as hosts were in charge of everything. So they flooded the slow courts, and they kept the balls refrigerated under the stands. The balls were like ice cubes. I couldn't have hit an ace with a cannon. I played his own game. And won." The greatest player in the world, playing "The Crocodile" on a swampy court, with balls that wouldn't bounce! French sportsmanship. Tilden admired the four great French players for their brilliance, but had reservations about Frenchness itself, saying in his autobiography, *My Story*, that Jean Borotra "was what passes for 'typically' French. That is to say, he had all the charm, warmth, glamour and complete insincerity which is Paris." Tilden was a good writer, indeed the author of many books. He appeared in Hollywood silent movies and the later talkies, as well as in several Broadway plays. He was also a ferocious bridge player, knew all the rules and also the interpretations of the rules. Not everyone appreciated this. Or that he almost always won.

All the players came to the West Side Tennis Club in those days when I was 16 and it was 1946.

When I stepped outside the door of the club for the first time and stood on the terrace, I saw a large horseshoe-shaped arrangement of courts—about 50 composition and clay courts around the perimeter and some 30 grass courts in the middle—surrounded by carefully kept flowerbeds. At one end of the horseshoe was the concrete stadium, the “House that Tilden Built,” so many were the people during the 1920s who had wanted to see him play.

That first day as I looked out, I saw Pauline Betz, a former champion, playing on a composition court nearby. And there was former heavyweight champion Gene Tunney playing doubles on a court beyond her. Gene Tunney was so big his racket looked like a toothpick in his hand. At the club I would meet not only Tilden and Budge but Bobby Riggs, Frank Parker, Bill Talbert, Francisco “Pancho” Segura, “Gorgeous” Gussie Moran, Alice Marble, Tony Trabert, Vic Seixas, Richard Gonzales. Not “Pancho” Gonzales. “Richard, please.” He was born in Los Angeles, and considered himself as American as anyone else. To me it seemed that everyone came to the club in the summer.

## THE MANNERS REQUIRED BY THE CLUB OF ALL CHAMPIONS, TOURNAMENT PLAYERS, CLUB MEMBERS, AND JUNIORS—ESPECIALLY JUNIORS—WERE CASUAL BUT ALSO STRICT, POLITE, UNDERSTATED, AND SELF-EFFACING.

It was the American Wimbledon: both citadels of the gentlemanly ideal, both with insignias consisting of gold tennis rackets within a gold circle. Over the entrance to Centre Court at Wimbledon a sign bore the lines from Kipling’s poem “If”: “If you can meet both triumph and disaster / And treat these two imposters

just the same...” then you will be a “man,” that is, a gentleman.

Triumph and disaster are to be faced without display, indeed with equanimity, since you know that the Game and its commanding traditions are more important than whether you win or lose. That’s why both Wimbledon and the West Side Tennis Club required white tennis clothes; colors could suggest self-display. And that’s why you shake hands at the end of a match and try to look as if you meant it. As Hamlet said to Queen Gertrude, “Affect a virtue if you have it not.” The Game is why a real tennis crowd never cheers an error. An error damages the ideal game. And that’s why you would never, ever throw a racket, let alone smash one on the ground. Bad manners insult the Game itself.

The manners required by the club of all champions, tournament players, club members, and juniors—especially juniors—were casual but also strict, polite, understated, self-effacing, broadly Protestant, and, historically, English in derivation. C.S. Lewis thought no Frenchman could be a gentleman—too overstated in manners, too much self, too little social distance. At the club, conspicuous ethnicity was discouraged. One of the junior players made the sign of the cross when he was in a tight spot

in a match. This, he was told, would not do. Some of the best players in the Club were Jewish, or were thought to be, but this wasn’t noticed. Many members were of course Catholic, Irish and Italian. But they had no ethnic characteristics. Protestant manners were the manners of a gentleman, or a lady, and

Protestants weren’t an ethnic group but the norm.

One time I was having lunch in the dining room with one of the better women players at the club. We saw Frank Parker walk in, champion in 1944 and 1945. It turned out, she knew him and he joined us for lunch. A handsome fellow, he was a bit eccentric, and opened an attaché case at the table. It was full of little bottles of pills. He took a couple at lunch. To my amazement, he asked if I would like to practice with him. He “needed some work on his backhand.” What? He had about the best backhand in tennis at that time.

My finest hour. We went out onto one of the green composition courts, below the left end of the terrace, which immediately became crowded with people. He hit a unique backhand—hard but with a slight underspin and relentless control—and as we hit back and forth, his shots kept creeping deeper and deeper until they were almost clipping the baseline. I kept digging these out and returning them. Then Frank, as I had begun to call him, stopped hitting and walked up to the net. He took off his slightly tinted prescription glasses.

“Where did you learn to hit the backhand?”

“Billy Talbert,” I said. “On the Seventh Regiment Armory wooden courts.”

I had been in the junior development program there, underage and illegally in the State Guard so I could join the Seventh Regiment Tennis Club. Talbert, who had a fine backhand, taught me to get my weight moving forward by lifting my rear foot a little as I hit the ball. Parker put his glasses back on.

“I thought it was Talbert,” he said. “Would you like to play a set?”

Play we did. Long rallies, his control beautiful, and he let me win three games. Playing Parker with much of the club watching, well, it was almost too much.

Another time I found myself in a doubles game on the grass against Alice Marble and a college player. She never played with other women. My partner was a club member, a professional piano player and a fine tennis player. Marble had won the national championships in 1939 and 1940, her career, like Budge's, interrupted by the war.

I CAN STILL REMEMBER SITTING ON THAT TERRACE **AFTER A DAY OF TENNIS,**  
SIPPING A GIN AND TONIC, **WATCHING THE SUN SET** OVER THE STADIUM, WHILE  
OFF IN THE DISTANCE **LIGHTS BEGIN TO GLITTER IN THE TOWERS OF MANHATTAN.**

She was blonde, tanned, had long legs and wide shoulders, and hit a surprisingly hard American twist serve, tough to handle on the grass. The match went along nicely, everyone holding serve. Then I threw up a lob up over Marble's head. Now very few women hit an overhead really hard, and I usually could pick one off and volley it back with authority. Not this time. Marble took a few steps back, and her overhead sounded like a pistol shot. The ball whizzed past, altogether too close for my physical safety. No more lobs that day to Alice Marble. Yes, she never played with other women. Maybe other women wouldn't play with her.

Bobby Riggs was great fun, coming to the club when he was in New York to play in the annual professional tournament. He would play with anyone, even us juniors, as long as we bet—for dimes, Cokes, anything. He was famous for outsmarting the London bookies in 1939, by betting he would win the singles, doubles, and mixed doubles at Wimbledon. Unheard of—and he got heavy odds against doing it. He figured he'd beat "Bunny" Austin, the British champion, but in fact beat Elwood Cooke in the final. He won the men's doubles with Cooke and the mixed doubles with Alice

Marble. With a small bet he collected a fortune from the bookies.

With his cocky duck-footed walk, he was nevertheless a superb athlete and had rodent-like speed around the court. He had every shot in the game and tricks off the shots, and he was a great tactician. A little-known fact is that he—not Tilden, not Budge, not Gonzales or

Kramer—holds the record for service aces in the Forest Hills Stadium. He was only 5'8", but he could serve ace after ace because of his powerful wrist. He could change the direction of the ball at the last instant of his service swing, hitting a fast one down the middle or swinging it wide. Impossible to read.

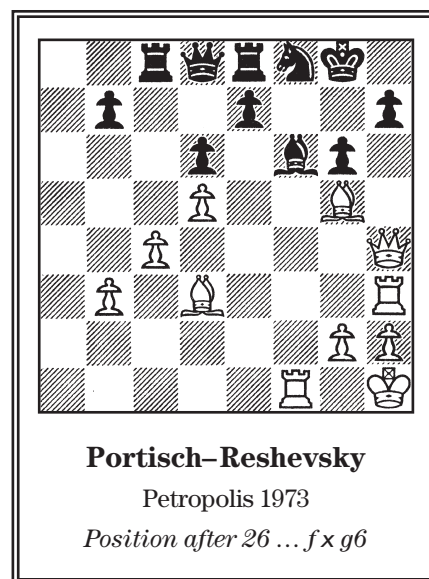
Every Saturday night during the summer, there was a formal dance. The routine was pretty strict. Your date usually was a club member. In fact, if a junior girl did not have a date for the dance as it approached, a senior member would nudge you: "You know, Mary Lou hasn't been asked..." Most of the girls lived in Forest Hills Gardens, where the red-brick required style had been designed by the architect son of Frederick Law Olmstead, the renowned landscape architect who, with Calvert Vaux, designed Central Park.

Always you bought an orchid corsage and picked up your date in the Gardens, walking to the club. Though teenagers, we aspired to adulthood—seersucker or blue blazers and neckties—and for dances we of course wore white formal jackets. We danced to the same music as adults—Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Strauss waltzes. There were some faster dances

too, brought forward from the 1920s, the Charleston and the Lindy Hop, named for Lindberg's 1927 "hop" from Long Island to Paris. Adult tournament players sometimes showed up, and we danced with the women. One of the unique features of the 1960s was that rock and roll gave the "kids" their own music, and the adults imitated them. We had it the other way around.

The beauty of the club and its ideals of conduct are permanent things for me. I can still remember sitting on that terrace after a day of tennis, sipping a gin and tonic, watching the sun set over the stadium, while off in the distance lights begin to glitter in the towers of Manhattan. Out across the grass courts dozens of sprinklers make rainbows against the dusk and guarantee that tomorrow the grass will still be its velvet green, the flowerbeds vari-colored, and I think of Scott Fitzgerald's essay about New York in the 1920s, "Come back, come back, O glittering and white." ■

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# Breaking Ranks

The answer to military strain is not more troops but less war.

By Christopher Preble

LONG BEFORE they were clamoring for more troops in Iraq—30,000, 50,000, even 80,000 in Frederick Kagan's fondest imaginings—neoconservatives needed to swell the ranks of the American military to accomplish their global mission.

Now the Bush administration has granted their wish. The latest defense budget requests \$715 billion for fiscal year 2008—bloated enough that the president's \$50 billion to begin expanding the Army and Marine Corps seems comparatively temperate.

It's not. By this blueprint, the temporary increase of 30,000 Army personnel approved in January 2004 will become permanent. Bush then proposes adding another 35,000 troops over a five-year period, 7,000 each year, bringing total Army "end strength" to 547,000 in 2012. The Marine Corps, 180,000 strong today, will add 22,000 to its ranks.

Democrats eager to ensure that their newfound opposition to the Iraq War doesn't tarnish their national security credentials can't wait to vote yea. During a January hearing of the House Armed Services Committee, Missouri Democrat Ike Skelton congratulated himself: "Every time I had a chance to say, 'We need more Army troops, more Marines,' I said it. ... This increase is a smart policy. I'm more than pleased to say, better late than never." Rahm Emanuel, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, grudgingly praised the president for "realiz[ing] the need for increasing the size of the armed forces," but was quick to note, "this is where the Democrats have been for two years."

The think-tank community adds an enthusiastic second. In January 2005, the Project for a New American Century published an open letter to congressional leaders calling for "at least 25,000 troops each year over the next several years." The statement was signed by foreign-policy luminaries from across the spectrum from Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute to *The New Republic's* Peter Beinart to AEI's Danielle Pletka.

But as it was in Iraq, the bipartisan consensus is again wrong. Incrementally expanding ground forces won't extricate us from the Baghdad bramble, it costs too much—far more over the long-term than the \$12.1 billion included in the president's budget—and it reflects a flawed conception of the nature of the threats we will likely face in the future. Advocates for a larger Army assume that all of the military's current missions are essential and that we must embark on many more. A better approach than arguing that we have too few troops to do all that we are doing would be to ask whether we should be doing all of these things in the first place.

It's tempting to assume that pouring troops into Iraq will rescue our failed policy. But by the time they are recruited, trained, exercised, and deployed, President Bush will be out office, and whoever moves into the White House on Jan. 21, 2009, will not want American troops to remain in Iraq indefinitely. As Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin noted, "it is important that we understand exactly what these additional personnel are needed for, in the

long term, that was not foreseen in the Quadrennial Defense Review submitted a year ago that rejected such increases. Do we intend to stay in Iraq for years to come? Does the administration think the 'long war' with terrorism is going to be won with large ground forces operating in foreign nations?"

Levin's concerns are well-placed. Expansion will cost \$95 billion from FY 2008-12, and Gordon Adams, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, estimates that it will add another \$15-20 billion each year after that. More soldiers need more helmets, uniforms, boots, and food, airplanes, helicopters, and trucks to get them to a fight, not to mention rifles and bullets once they get there.

If the troops are not going to salvage our sinking fortunes in Iraq, what would be this larger force's mission? We seem to be growing the Army without any clear sense of what we expect it to do. If we need more troops to conduct a war in Iran, Pakistan, or some other country, there is serious doubt that the American people would support such an endeavor and even more doubt we could prevail, as Iraq attests.

No nation is foolish enough to fight the United States using conventional means. To the extent that we need a deterrent against other nation-states, our massive nuclear arsenal in Air Force missile silos and U.S. Navy submarines is more than sufficient. Our conventional military dominance has encouraged potential adversaries to fight us in unconventional ways, however, and our national security strategy must adapt