The question has always been: ‘Tennis, anyone?’

This is the peak season for tennis. Not only is Wimbledon underway on the grass courts of All-England, but the 64th Sonoma County Open tournament starts this week at Sonoma State’s courts.

Tennis in Sonoma County has a sporadic history. And a social history. The local tournament that will be played next week is not the 64th Annual. There have been a lot of years skipped and several versions of the Santa Rosa Tennis Club have waxed and waned in the 83 years since the sport first hit town.

There have been as many home courts for the local teams as there have been club re-organizations. When the first Santa Rosa Tennis Club was formed in 1898 the only court in town was a private one, at the Cherry Street home of John P. Overton, who owned a hotel and was mayor. By 1905, the Santa Rosa Girls’ Tennis Club was also using the Overton court. Petaluma’s town tennis team practiced on a court on the outskirts of town as early as 1908.

SRTC had a court of its own in the area between North and Fourth and McDonald Avenue in the 1920s. In 1935, in the do-it-yourself spirit of the Great Depression, a group of tennis players built courts at Nason and Slater streets. Future city treasurer Ashton Hayes and Charlie Reilly, who would become the last owner of the landmark Gordon’s Drive-in, and others worked to convert an abandoned building into a locker room, with showers. At least one of the courts was lighted. It was a first-rate facility.

The first quasi-public courts are referred to as the Fremont School courts—Fremont at that time being on the present site of Santa Rosa Junior High. In 1934, the first public court, built and maintained by the city, was constructed in the original Howarth Park on South A Street. (Those courts are now part of the Burbank Park— the name selected when the Howarth title went to a regional park on Summerfield Road, with its own tennis complex, in the 1950s.)

IT IS APPARENT, reading tennis historian John Lesjak’s club history compiled 30 years ago, that the 18th century version of SRTC did not survive. Lesjak credits young Hiltlur Comstock with being the “founder” of the club in 1896.

Comstock, who would become a lawyer, the president of the Board of Education and a Superior Court judge, was still a student, but already a skilled tennis player when he and his family arrived from Illinois in 1898. The Overton court was still the only one in town, but young men like Comstock, George Palmer, Finlaw Geary, and J. Mervyn Dwyer were part of an active team that played against like groups from Petaluma and Healdsburg for Santa Rosa’s honor.

World War I stopped the fun— in fact, skirmishes with Pancho Villa on the Mexican border in 1916 took away many of these young sportsmen, including Capt. Comstock of Company E. (After WWI service in France, now-Major Comstock spent some time at Oxford before returning to practice law in Santa Rosa, and honed his tennis skills on a team from Oriel College at the English university, which was pretty heady stuff for a young country lawyer from California.)

**Comstock at Oxford, 1919**

The yearly tournaments were sponsored by The Press Democrat, Salesman Arthur Daly, club president in 1928, established a rotating singles trophy called the Daly Cup, which occasioned contests between Eliz Destrul and Stewart House over the next three years. In addition Lombard’s Gun Shop, Dixon Hardware and Mailer-Frey Hardware (Clark Mailer was a player) sponsored special cups. Among the names to be found on them were Reilly and Hayes as well as Crawford Brooks, Joe Novelli, Beecher Kellogg, Fred Lemon and Henry Williams.

**Moving into the 1950s, SRTC became more serious about its sport. Dunlap and Harold Parkerson constructed and posted an official tennis ladder at the Howarth Park courts. The Howarth Foundation (administered by a board that included Judge Comstock) put up $4,000 for new court surfaces at the park courts on A Street.**

By this time Erwin Douglas was in town. Erwin was a junior high shop teacher whose main outside interest was tennis. He even had a half-court he had built at home. It was in the garage. With the help of his student, Bill Schaefier, it was the first of the outdoor courts to be built.

**Norm Walter was a frequent doubles partner for Douglas. Walter owned Indian Creek Lumber Company. In the early ‘70s, when the Indian Creek property had become Coddington. Walters built La Cantera, the first private club since World War II. In 1973, the club tournament was held there for the first time.**

Tennis players increased with the population in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The courts at the new Howarth Park as well as those at SSR, SRTC, and at Santa Rosa and Montgomery high schools, were filled with recreational players on weekends.

The city recreation department initiated a series of tennis classes with instructors Bob Young and Patsy Young (unrelated) that drew dozens of young mothers into the outdoors and exercise. It was not uncommon, in the early ‘70s, to see a tennis class going on while a roving section of toddlers chattered (or screamed, at least) from a row of playpens just outside the fence. Tennis was “in.”

**SRTC had more than 300 members by 1973.**

IT’S FUN to look at Lesjak’s 1973 summary of tennis in the area. SRTC’s ladders for that year showed two familiar combinations among the club’s top players—Rick and John Olmsted were first and second, and Ed Anderson, sixth and seventh. Arnie Schultz was third. Phil Krohe, who once made a valiant effort at a Guinness record for non-stop tennis playing, going on for more than a weekend, was ranked fourth on the ladder. Howard Levin, fifth, and Ed Dunlap, the easter-beaver of the late ‘40s, was holding on at number eight.

There are plenty of names there that were familiar faces on the Howarth courts—teachers Tom Blackstone and Johnny Masse, lawyer and owner of what was probably the town’s first tennis shop, a tiny establishment on Montgomery Drive near Fourth.

A few of the top players in town that year were Lori Gross, Barbara Larrieu and Virginia Sharkey. The top player (nov an A) was Jean Clyde, now Schultz. It’s social commentary you want from your tennis history, consider this: On the ladder of 25 mixed doubles teams in 1973, 11 were husband and wife teams who are no longer married to each other, proving that it’s absolutely true what they say about mixed doubles.

That’s not to be taken seriously. Tennis is for fun— as can be seen in the theme of the tournament coming up this week. The idea is to collect new tennis balls for the budget-crimped local school programs. Each player is asked to donate an unopened can. Theathy: “Gotta Have Balls to Play.” Tennis is also for life — as a quick scan of the senior division, with names like John Olmsted and Phil Krohe, will clearly show.

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