

Saturday, January 30 and Sunday, January 31, 2016

The Weekend

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KEEPING IT REAL

How the 'sport of kings' is still going strong in Hayling

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Cover Story

deal with your

WOW

Your Weekend

JOHN CAMERON
COLUMNIST
PAGE 5

STEVE POWER
COLUMNIST
PAGE 5

ALISTAIR GIBSON
WINE
PAGE 6

LAWRENCE MURPHY
COOKING
PAGE 6

TRAVEL
FRANCE BY FERRY
PAGE 7

BRIAN KIDD
GARDENING
PAGE 9

BOB HIND
NOSTALGIA
PAGES 10-11

TV GUIDE
GUNS N' ROSES
PAGES 16-17


This is the real thing

There are only 50 or so real tennis courts in the world - and one of them is in Hayling Island. **JEFF TRAVIS** finds out all about this 'sport of kings'.

It's been likened to chess on a tennis court.

And it was a favourite sport of King Henry VIII, who had a court built at Hampton Court, while his daughter Elizabeth I became a keen spectator.

Four hundred years later and this regal sport of real tennis - often called 'the sport of kings' - has a relatively small, but committed, following centring on one of the world's 50 or so courts.

And we are lucky enough to have it right here on our doorstep.

Seacourt Tennis Club, in Hayling Island, boasts one of the UK's 26 courts and attracts players of all standards from across the south.

More than just a sport, real tennis and the social side around it is a way of

life for many.

I visit Seacourt and meet a couple whose life revolves around real tennis - and their passion

certainly shines through.

Tory Wall, 50, from Hayling, works part-time for the Tennis & Rackets Association, the governing body of real tennis, while her partner, Paul Weaver, a retired company director, now leads junior real tennis in the UK.

Tory says: 'My son Ben started to play real tennis and I used to take him to Saturday morning junior lessons.'

'I used to sit and watch and as he got better I began to think I'd quite like to have a go.'

'The game is very strong on etiquette and behaviour, as well as obviously hitting the ball.

'There are a lot of funny rules to the game which have belonged through its long history.'

'I think this is probably one of the reasons people get hooked on the game - it is interesting as well as giving you a good workout.'

The sport involves hitting a ball over a net, but that's where its similarity with the modern game of tennis ends.

Paul, 65, explains: 'There's no other sport like this.'

'The original game was started in the courtyard of a French monastery.'

'As luck would have it, one end of the court had a wall that stuck out.



Paul Weaver leads junior real tennis in the UK.



Tory Wall.

Jeff has a go

For the past 25 or so years I have been honing my tennis game and have played with all kinds of rackets – wooden, metal, graphite, moth-eaten ones from my grandma's store cupboard. But this bent-looking racket with a head not much bigger than my hand is a new one for me. Little did I realise that I hadn't been playing tennis all these years, if you adopt a purist stance.

As a 'tennis' player, stepping on to the grand indoor court with its quirky-shaped walls is a mixture of familiarity – obviously there's a net – and being a fish out of water.

The huge court is almost like a theatre and has an assortment of lines.

The ball is a revelation for me. At first glance, it's a cross between a baseball and a cricket ball. Forget reaching up for balls around your shoulders, this ball barely bounces a few inches off the ground and the health and safety expert in me says that if this round thing is really whacked it could damage me and/or my opponent.

My knees certainly get a good test in our practice hit.

Within a few minutes, hitting the ball feels really good. Like tennis, there's a gracefulness and sense of power when you connect with the ball.

You certainly need good co-ordination for this sport and I'm not quite up to the task yet when balls are bouncing off your feet – after trickling down a wall.

It might take me a few months to pick up the rules, but I'm already enjoying the rallies.

You need strong hands, though. Trying to hit a volley when the ball is hurtling towards you, your whole body reverberates from the impact!

Hitting the ball into the bell – yes a ringing one – in the corner of the court is my highlight.

Our doubles session is a lot of fun and there's plenty of laughs, grunting and groaning and the feel-good endorphins are high. It's certainly a sport I would love to play more.

● Seacourt Tennis Club is in Victoria Avenue, Hayling Island. To enquire about real tennis lessons call 023 9246 6122 or visit seacourt.com

To find out more about the game nationally, visit tennisandrackets.com



Reporter Jeff Travis has a go at real tennis.



Seacourt Tennis Club in Victoria Avenue, Hayling Island.

'The game developed around what was around the courtyard.

'Real tennis is the original racket sport.

'Originally they played it without a racket, they

played it with their hand.

'Eventually I imagine the monks got pretty fed up with hitting the ball with their hand and developed some sort of a racket.

'Now you think of all the racket sports all over the world and it all comes back to this.'

The fact that a court survives in Hayling Island is amazing.

The original building was built in 1911 by businessman John Marshall, who picked up the sport while at Cambridge University and wanted his own private court in his back garden on Hayling seafront.

'It's really quite bizarre there is a court on Hayling Island,' explains Paul.

'In about 1950, nobody used the court. The roof caved in and eventually it was sold for building land.

'One of the guys who is now part of the families that own the club remembered it from when he was a young man.

'He went and saw the builder and bought the land back off him.

'It was that close to being a cul-de-sac.'

TURN TO PAGE 4

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FROM PAGE 3

the game, which includes more than 20 different types of serves.

'It's much more interesting than a normal game of tennis,' says Paul.

'I used to play lawn tennis quite a lot and once I discovered this game, I sometimes go out and play lawn tennis and it's just so simple.'

Tory says she gets a feel-good buzz whenever she steps on court.

'You feel a sense of the past,' she says.

'So many traditions are still a big part of the game that you can't help feeling something special.'

Today Seacourt has around 800 members.

Tory says: 'It can be played by all standards of players because there is a handicap system which works really well.'

'So a really good player can still have a great game with a not so good player.'

'We are really lucky to have a court on Hayling Island.'

'The ball and the racket are both very heavy so you have to have your wits about you when the ball is coming towards you.'

Paul loves the variety of



Alex Garside (55) from Hayling Island, MD of Seacourt Tennis Club.

'I'm still learning'

Alex Garside got her first real tennis racket as a 21st birthday present – and she hasn't looked back since.

The mum-of-two has travelled the world playing the racket sport she fell in love with as a 20-year-old.

And she also found romance on the court.

In 1985, on a trip to Seacourt to play in the Ladies British Open, she met her husband-to-be Ian Garside, a fellow real tennis fan.

She is now loving her life as the newly-installed managing director at Seacourt, overseeing its 800-strong membership.

'It's a great challenge and one I am relishing,' says Alex, a former world doubles champion who lives across the road from the club.

'It's good because I'm learning new things every day.'

One of Alex's missions is to get more women playing real tennis. She can look back on a successful career as a player and looks forward to many more matches.

'I shall play as long as my body does not give in!' she laughs. She has lost count of the number of trophies she has won. 'I have a lot of glassware!' she adds.

Rosie competed in US Open

Not many retired headteachers get to compete in an international sporting event.

But 61-year-old Rosie Law found herself in the US Ladies Open for real tennis after a doubles partner pulled out at the last minute.

'I can claim that even though it was off scratch and there was no hope,' says Rosie, who got the opportunity while she was enjoying her post-retirement travels in America with her husband. 'But it was a lot of good fun.' Rosie, who was headteacher at Emsworth Primary School, took up the sport two years ago and now tries to play several times a week. 'It's a different sort of a sport,' says Rosie, who lives in Hayling.

'You need to have a few lessons to stop making mistakes and get the right technique.'

'The scoring is very different and quite strategic.'

'You have to be careful because the ball is very hard. I tend to wear protective eye glasses.'



Diana Wilson and Rosie Law play real tennis on a regular basis at Seacourt Tennis Club.

Players stitch their own balls

You can't imagine Roger Federer making his own tennis balls.

But in the world of real tennis it's a must because there are no manufacturers.

Every professional makes their own balls and Marc Seigneur is no different.

The former World No 16 is a regular at Seacourt and travels

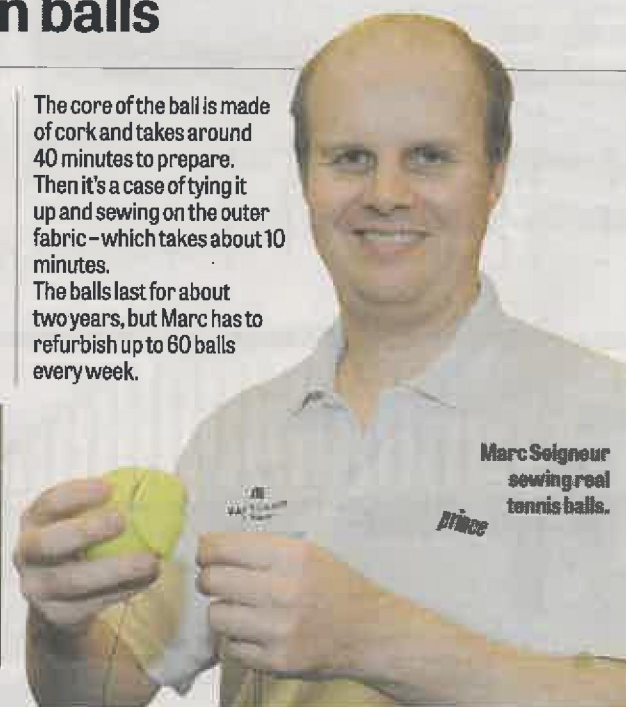
down from his home in Oxford. Marc, originally from France, picked up his first real tennis racket at Seacourt at the age of 12 after his family moved to Hayling Island when his father was posted to the local IBM office.

'I came across it by luck,' says Marc, who coaches the sport. 'I just love the game.'

The core of the ball is made of cork and takes around 40 minutes to prepare. Then it's a case of tying it up and sewing on the outer fabric – which takes about 10 minutes. The balls last for about two years, but Marc has to refurbish up to 60 balls every week.



The process of making a real tennis ball.



Marc Seigneur sewing real tennis balls.

Quick facts about the history of real tennis

- The game's origins were in handball (jeu de paume in French) played in the 12th century in France. The game came to be played against the walls of town buildings and keeps of castles, and in and outside monasteries

- and ecclesiastical buildings. A leather glove was developed to protect the hand and then a racket.

- The origin of the word tennis is thought to stem from the Anglo-Norman imperative

- tenetz! The cry of warning given by the server, 'Take this! Play!'

- The game spread across the English Channel as England once had vast territories in France.

- Henry VIII's second wife Anne Boleyn, pictured right, was watching a game of real tennis when she was arrested and it is believed that Henry was playing tennis when news was brought to him of her execution.

- The French Revolution in 1789 brought an abrupt end to real tennis throughout France, to such an extent that there are now only two active courts remaining – in Paris (built in 1919 and Fontainebleau (1702).

