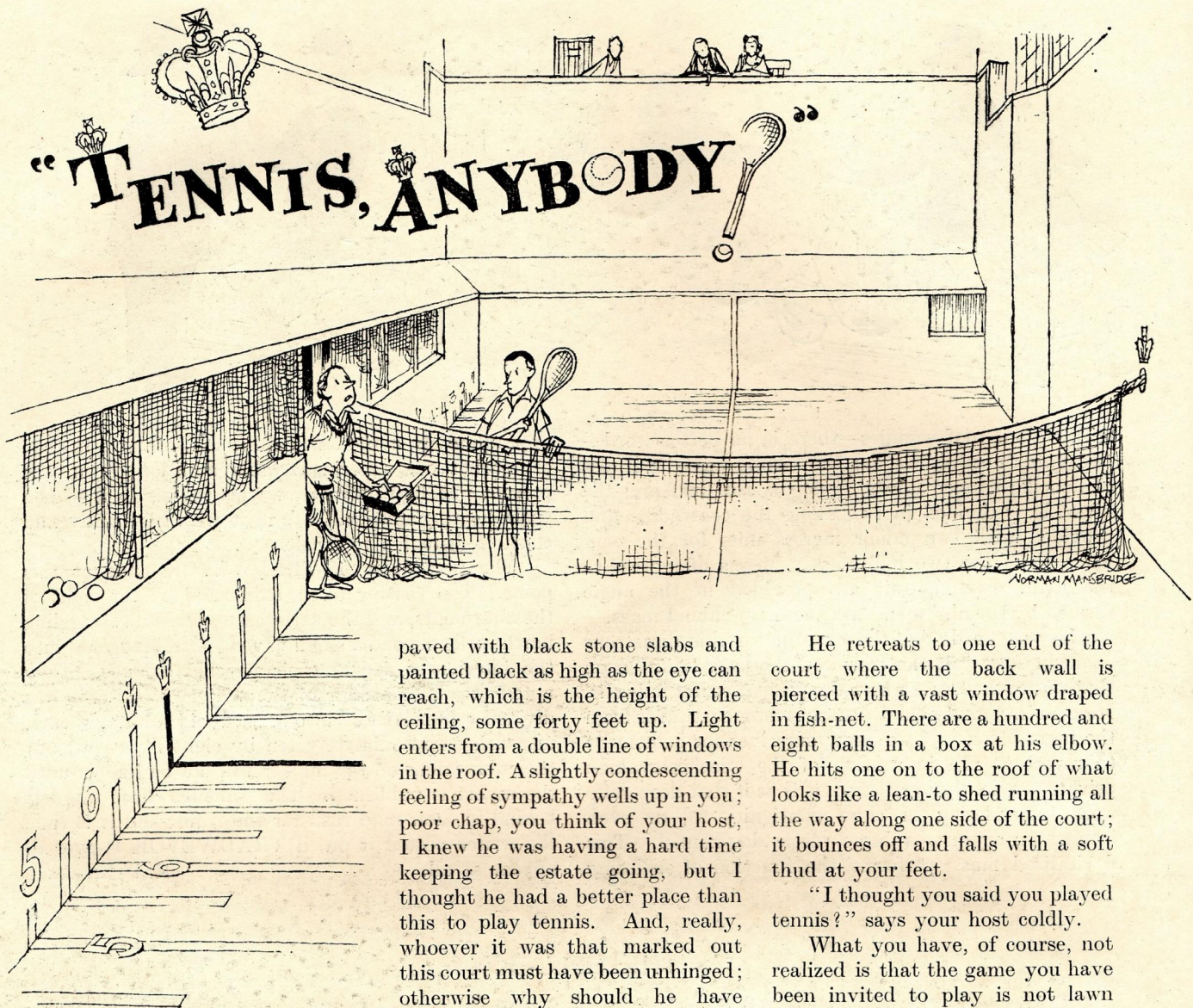


OCTOBER
8
1952

Vol. CCXXIII
No. 5843



"TENNIS, anybody?"

The old country-house battle-cry rings out and you are on your feet in a flash. Ever since the day you won the gents' singles in the local tournament you have waited for this. Your host's invitation has hardly echoed three times round the rafters of his ancestral hall before you have changed into your immaculate white flannels, tucked your two rackets under your arm (or more, if you take the game seriously), and leaped into the garden with a gay smile.

"The court's through here," says your host, leading you back into the house. You follow him, slightly mystified, into a vast room

paved with black stone slabs and painted black as high as the eye can reach, which is the height of the ceiling, some forty feet up. Light enters from a double line of windows in the roof. A slightly condescending feeling of sympathy wells up in you; poor chap, you think of your host, I knew he was having a hard time keeping the estate going, but I thought he had a better place than this to play tennis. And, really, whoever it was that marked out this court must have been unhinged; otherwise why should he have traversed it with green lines every yard from base-line to net, and carried some of them a few feet up the wall at that, and then painted royal crowns in green and red all over the place? Resisting a temptation to pat your host on the shoulder you step forward to tighten the net, which is sagging mournfully from a height of five feet or so at the edges to three feet in the middle.

"Don't do that," says your host testily. "Here," he adds, "you'd better have a proper racket"; and he passes you a curious implement with a square wooden handle some fifteen inches long and a lopsided head about ten inches along its major diameter. "Rough," he says, spinning the equally asymmetrical tool he is holding. "I'll serve."

He retreats to one end of the court where the back wall is pierced with a vast window draped in fish-net. There are a hundred and eight balls in a box at his elbow. He hits one on to the roof of what looks like a lean-to shed running all the way along one side of the court; it bounces off and falls with a soft thud at your feet.

"I thought you said you played tennis?" says your host coldly.

What you have, of course, not realized is that the game you have been invited to play is not lawn tennis, or even table tennis, but TENNIS. Sometimes nowadays it is called real tennis, sometimes royal tennis, sometimes (according to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*) court tennis or Lord's tennis. But this is the old, original game of tennis, of which King Henry the Fifth, or at any rate William Shakespeare, was thinking when he said:

*When we have match'd our rackets to these balls,
We will, in France, by God's grace,
play a set
Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard.
Tell him he hath made a match with such a wrangler
That all the courts of France will be disturb'd
With chases.*



The game, as we now know—or don't know—it, has been virtually unchanged since Henry the Eighth played it on his court at Hampton Court, where, if he were still alive and not too senile, he might play it now. M. de Garsault claims in *The Art of the Tennis-Racket-Maker and of Tennis* that the Greeks and Romans knew the game. To judge from the shape of the court, however, the tennis of our day grew up in the cloisters of abbeys and monasteries where, no doubt, the monks extemporized their exercise by patting a ball of rolled-up rags about with their hands.

Tennis as practised for the last five centuries or so is played in a covered court about ninety feet long by thirty wide. The exact dimensions are variable, and unimportant. Around three sides of the court runs the penthouse, five feet from the edge of the court, seven feet high, and bearing a roof that slants at forty-five degrees. In the penthouse at the server's end of the court is a window, some twenty-two feet wide, giving on to the dedans—a kind



of gallery inside the penthouse. As the dedans is a favourite place for spectators, and as the balls are of the hardness of fives balls and weigh a couple of ounces apiece, the dedans is protected by a rope net.

Looking out from the dedans, you see another small opening at the far end of the court, on the right-hand side. This opening, called the grille, is closed with boards, and looks exactly like a shuttered window: which originally it was. On the left are the galleries, which are windows in the long side of the penthouse. They are called (starting from the dedans end) the

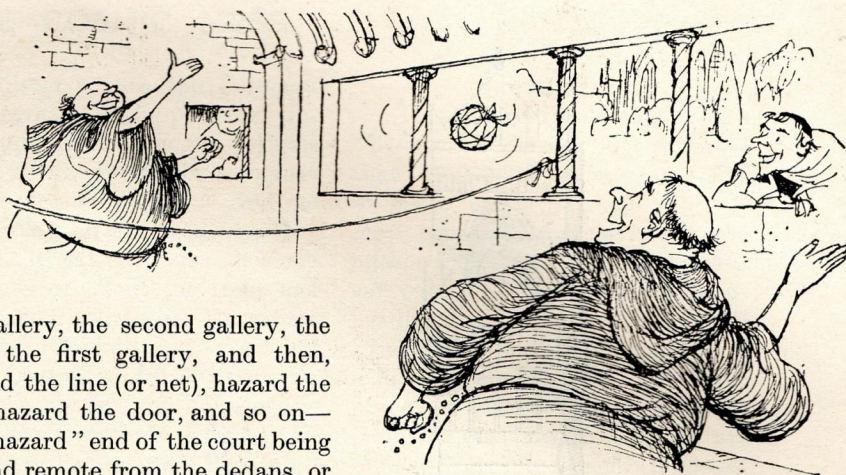
last gallery, the second gallery, the door, the first gallery, and then, beyond the line (or net), hazard the first, hazard the door, and so on—the "hazard" end of the court being the end remote from the dedans, or "service" end.

To complete the complexities of the court, there is an eighteen-inch buttress with an oblique face at the hazard end of the right-hand wall. This is called the tambour.

The whole is painted black. According to M. de Garsault's book "the masters of tennis make this black themselves . . . Take half a hogshead of ox's blood, 14 bushels of lamp-black, 10 galls of oxen to dilute the lamp-black, and a bucket of wine to give sheen to the composition." I think Mr. Jack Groom, the professional at Lord's, from whose copy of de Garsault I quote, uses a less extravagant formula.

To describe the game in detail would be a long business, and it could in any case only be clear to anyone who has seen it played. The players hold their rackets half-way up the handle and adopt a crouching pose designed to keep the head of the racket above the wrist and the ball low. Service is always from the "service" end, and the ball must first pitch on the penthouse roof.

The scoring is basically as in lawn tennis, but more complex. Besides the familiar ways of gaining points, there are also what are known as "chases." You make a chase if you hit the ball into a gallery on your opponent's side of the net, or if he allows it to bounce twice. If its second bounce lands, say, just beyond the three-yard line, you have made a chase of three yards, and he must attack it by scoring a better chase, i.e. one further from the net. There is no score for a chase, but when two



chases have been made the players change ends (and therefore service).

But the only way to understand the game is to see it played. Since there are no more than fourteen courts in use in England, this is not so easy; Londoners, at any rate, may do so at Lord's, or at Queen's Club, or at Hampton Court.

Should the reader not feel the above data sufficient to enable him to decide whether or not the game is worth watching—or playing—I might add that Mr. Groom, a former professional champion, imputes to it the beneficent qualities not only of tennis and rackets but also of cricket and chess. It is small wonder that a game at once so salutary and so intellectual should have been singled out, as de Garsault (whose great work, I am sorry to say, has been published in English only in a limited edition of two hundred copies) reports, as the sole game to be described by the French Royal Academy of Sciences.

B. A. YOUNG

