

## Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...

# TENNIS ANYONE?

The two outdoor activities I enjoyed most in my life were flying—and tennis! The former was of course my essential profession for 35 years whereas the latter was my preferred game for 65 years. As a school boy in the 1930/40s I was introduced to tennis by my father who took me along to his club and, after playing, handed his racquet over for me to pick up the basics from the club markers. In college we were fortunate to have a court alongside our hostel and, with regular practice with some talented and experienced fellow students, I was able to make it to the college team by 1949-50. On joining the air force in 1951, a fellow flight cadet and I were invited to play tennis at a local club by our Chief Ground Instructor (CGI). My more experienced partner (he had represented BHU) and I were just able to get the better of the CGI (a future Services player) and his partner (a future CAS); both of them were to be my mentors in the years to come.

In the early 1950s, few fighter air bases had any courts in their Officers Messes or in nearby clubs, hence tennis was sporadic. However, three tenures at Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s provided, not only joint services professional knowledge in the class room, but much tennis at the Wellington Gymkhana Club. In fact, while on the faculty in 1973-75, I was fortunate to have some keen and talented players who did the college proud in tournaments at various Planters clubs in the Nilgiris.

One special game is remembered. My son, then a teenager in boarding school and a good tennis player, was on holiday and we were playing together at the Coonoor club when the legendary Krishnan and his teenage son (up from Madras/Chennai for the weekend) joined us. On discovering that we too were father and son, he invited



us to play a friendly doubles; no prizes for guessing who won!

In 1980, while attending the course at the RCDS London, we were very fortunate to have the President of RAFTA (Royal Air Force Tennis Association) as a member. Thanks to his links, four of us from three different countries played regularly at the courts in Belgrave Square but where I had to learn to pick up tennis balls myself! He also helped us to attend the Wimbledon Championships that year. On the first day of the Championship my wife and I joined all the other Indians present at Court No 17 to cheer young Vijay Amritraj. We were indeed lucky to see the top players of the day, but the best was yet to come. Thanks again to RAFTA, the four of us were invited to play a practice game at Wimbledon two weeks after the Championships closed, (“Tell your grandchildren you played here”) and were allotted Court No 17 ! (Since three of my grandchildren grew up within a kilometre of Wimbledon, they were not that impressed!).

Post retirement we settled in Secunderabad and were again fortunate to have tennis facilities at both the club and the RSI. On one occasion Nasiruddin Shah (whose brother was the then local Division commander) visited and I was invited to

form up a foursome for tennis. His touch on the court was as effective as on stage/screen and provided a great deal of excitement to our ball boys at the RSI who were thrilled that the thespian celebrity was on their tennis courts.

On one of our many trips to the UAE I accompanied my teenage grandson to his club in Dubai where he was being trained by a professional coach from the Philippines. On learning that I was an old tennis player from India (I was then in my late 70s), he came over, introduced himself, invited me to play and mentioned that he had played against “your Amritraj”. I explained that I was an ordinary club level player but was delighted to see a fourth generation member of my family demonstrate excellent tennis potential under his training.

In my early 80s, I perceived that my tennis partners/opponents seemed to get younger and younger every day! After a fall on court (which fortunately broke no bones) my wife ruled out any more tennis and restricted my outdoor activities to the swimming pool. My tennis is now confined to the TV where I marvel at the power and precision of today’s top players. At this point I am tempted to draw some analogies between flying and tennis, but will leave that for another day...