A Revolutionary Championship

In April 1968, in a quiet leafy Bournemouth suburb, some of the world’s greatest tennis players took part in a tournament which would change the course of sporting history.

WORDS: Jeremy Miles
t was 1968, the year of revolution. Cobblestones and petrol bombs were flying in Paris, London, Prague and Chicago as students clashed with riot police.

But in sleepy Bournemouth, deep in the leafy suburb of Talbot Woods, an altogether quieter revolution was underway. No heads were cracked, though a few egos were bruised as the genteel environs of the West Hants Lawn Tennis Club became the unlikely venue for an irrevocable change in sporting history.

In April 1968, in the face of extraordinary opposition from tennis world authorities, the club staged the nation’s first Open Championships, a tournament in which both amateur and professionals could compete against each other.

It was the end of a long battle. Critics had claimed that open tennis would be a disaster. The International Tennis Federation had even threatened to expel some of the players and officials involved. But West Hants Club stalwart Derek Hardwick had other ideas. Hardwick, who was also an influential senior member of the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), was fed up with a sport divided. Quite apart from anything else an increasing number of amateur players were indulging in what had become known as ‘shamateurism’ and were receiving ‘under-the-table’ professional prize money.

With support from other major figures in the sport, Hardwick stuck his neck out and the LTA scrapped the distinction between amateurs and professionals. It was his home club in Bournemouth that staged the first historic tournament. The six day competition - actually played not on grass but on red shale - was a triumph and catapulted not just Bournemouth and Britain but the rest of the world into the modern era.

The 1968 British Hard Court Championships brought some of the major international players of that time to the English south coast including Australian stars like Rod Laver, Ken Rosewall,
Roy Emerson and Fred Stolle. It also offered a great platform for up and coming English amateurs like Mark Cox and Bournemouth girl and future Wimbledon Ladies Champion, Virginia Wade.

With the odds seemingly stacked against them most of the amateurs at Bournemouth that spring opted to play for a flat fee of £50 expenses rather than attempt to compete for the professional pot. In almost all cases this proved a wise move. But the up-and-coming Virginia Wade actually won the Ladies final and missed out on £300 in prize money, while Mark Cox made it to the semi-finals but instead of pocketing a £250 prize had to make do with just £4.

The professionals did somewhat better with the overall winner Rosewell getting £1,000 and Rod Laver taking the £500 runner-up prize.

These were not inconsiderable funds in 1968 but pale into insignificance when measured alongside the riches available to the titans of the modern game. It’s sobering to think that just nine years later, when Virginia Wade held the 1977 Wimbledon

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Ladies Singles trophy aloft, she received a cheque for £13,500. Today’s grand slam winners can each expect £2 million or more.

Needless to say the West Hants Club, originally founded in the 1920s, is enormously proud of the special place it holds in the history of tennis. Over the years the club has played host to an astonishing array of famous players including Fred Perry, Ilie Nastase, Evonne Goolagong and Maria Bueno, but it was the 1968 Open Championships that really put it on the map.

Not surprising then that this summer’s 50th anniversary celebrations of the start of the open era are already in full swing. In April Tim Henman visited the club, joining players who took part in the 1968 Bournemouth Open including Sue Mappin, Frances McLennan, John Paish and Mark Cox.

There were exhibition matches featuring John Feather, Miles Maclagan, Rob Booth and up-and-coming young players from the West Hants Academy including Abi Tyler, Hannah Smith, Toby Daniels and Jack Pinnington-Jones.

Afterwards Henman said: “Marking this anniversary back at the West Hants Club with some of history’s greatest tennis players has been very special.” He spoke of the “great debt of gratitude” owed to those who, 50 years ago, helped usher in the professional era. “It was a huge game-changer for players and tennis across the world.”

Looking at the displays around the walls of the plush, modern West Hants Club it is clear just how much it has changed since its early days. More than £8 million has been spent on the development of the club in the past 20 years but it acknowledges its heritage with pride. Rolls of honour listing tennis champions over the decades can be seen in its restaurant, while nearby vintage photographs show the quaint wooden club pavilion in 1926 where it all started.

West Hants Chief Executive, Peter Elviss shows me some of the other memorabilia. These include the wooden tennis rackets used in the 1968 tournament, now displayed on the wall. Compared with today’s state-of-the-art equipment, they look positively medieval.

“Our club really does have a very special place in the history of tennis,” he says, handing me a facsimile of the original 1968 Open Championships programme. It’s not just the names of the players that evoke memories of a bygone era but the advertisements too. Alongside a variety of ‘swinging sixties’ tennis fashions the glossy back cover is an ad for Embassy cigarettes from the tournament sponsors - the tobacco company WD & HO Wills. My, how times have changed!

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