



WIMBLEDON

BY CHRIS ODDO

When it comes to what kind of an emotional experience Wimbledon can be for players, Marcos Baghdatis sums it up well. “The first time he [Roger Federer] won Wimbledon, I was in front of my TV and I saw him cry, and I start to cry.”

Welcome to a tennis time machine: Wimbledon. “It’s our Super Bowl,” seven-time champion Pete Sampras once said of his Grand Slam stomping grounds. Fred Perry, the last British male to win the title, was similarly enraptured. “I’ve had a love affair with Wimbledon ever since I can remember,” he said. “It stays with you.”

It stays with you indeed. “It’s like a love affair that grows,” said Martina Navratilova, who won the singles trophy nine times. “It’s like a relationship where you love that person more and more. I feel this place in my bones.”

Since 1877, the annual pilgrimage to tennis Mecca has been the highlight of the tennis season, and even though it has evolved into a major commercial affair over the years,

Wimbledon has always made a concerted effort to cultivate and maintain its “tennis in an English garden” appeal. “We put emphasis on landscaping to create a garden atmosphere, with reduced impact from television and hospitality,” says Chris Gorringe, who served for 26 years as Wimbledon’s CEO and painstakingly oversaw a major upgrade in acreage and facilities without damaging the organic appeal of the event.

It is this dedication to old-world charm and the steadfast regard for tradition that keeps Wimbledon in favor with the players, the writers and the tennis viewing public. In a recent poll, 60 percent of tennis fans claimed that Wimbledon was their favorite Grand Slam.

Remarkably, none of the other three Grand Slams received more than 16% of the votes. “To me, it feels like this is where tennis is meant to be played,” says Maria Sharapova, the 2004 Wimbledon champion.

Many players share the same sentiment.

“It’s Wimbledon, and you can’t be tired,” said Frenchman Nicolas Mahut, after his epic eleven-hour marathon with John Isner that served to rewrite much of tennis’ record books.

“The U.S. Open is amazing,” says Venus Williams, when try-



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ing to accurately sum up her affection for her favorite place to play. "It's obviously where I'm from. But Wimbledon's where it all started. So you kind of got to hit Wimbledon before you get to the Open."

Some come to Wimbledon for world-class tennis, some to bask in the pleasant decorum of the knowledgeable British faithful and others to devour the Pimms and strawberries and cream on offer. But the heart and soul of The Championships can be found beneath the player's feet – the grass. Trimmed impeccably to 8mm in length, the 100 percent perennial rye grass is the magic carpet of the Grand Slam circuit.

Having a living, breathing surface beneath the player's feet adds color to the event, and it influences the strokes and the strategies of the players. Players begin the fortnight slipping and sliding on a verdant blanket of green, and by Finals weekend there are monstrous patches of dirt where grass has worn near the baseline.

The US Open and the Australian Open have long since switched from grass to hard courts, but Wimbledon, in spite of complaints that grass-court tennis was "dead" in the 90s, has never wavered in its support for tennis' original surface.

And that, in a nutshell, is the story of the allure of Wimbledon. While others have broken with tradition and pushed to modernize, the All England Club has carried on intrepidly with its vision of making its storied tradition a priority. There is no place on earth where tennis fans and players can feel as connected with the ghosts of the past. And there is no crown that is as sacred.

"I was 17 when I first laid eyes on the manicured grass of Wimbledon's Centre Court," writes Billie Jean King, who shares the all-time record for Wimbledon titles with Martina Navratilova (20). "It was an overwhelming moment. I had yet to play a single point, but for some reason, I felt at home there."

FOUR TO DIE FOR WIMBLEDON'S OPEN ERA HISTORY

It's never easy to choose between the legends of the sport. Who is better, and based on what? It's an endless debate, always rife with complications and challenges. Despite the difficulty, I believe few would argue that the following short list of men and women, whose Wimbledon achievements remain unrivalled, deserve to be recognized as Wimbledon elite.

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Gentlemen

Bjorn Borg

- > **5** Consecutive Titles
- > **41** consecutive wins
- > The last male to win Wimbledon without the loss of a set (1976)



"I was amazed," writes John McEnroe, of his epic 1980 Wimbledon final with Borg. "He had won four Wimbledon's in a row! I kept thinking 'Come on, isn't it enough?'"

As it turns out, four consecutive Wimbledon's wouldn't be enough for the iron-willed Swede. He would ultimately prevail in dramatic fashion over McEnroe in 1980, in what many feel was the most compelling match in the history of the tournament. Borg would then extend his dominion over Wimbledon to 41 consecutive matches at the All England Club, before finally succumbing to McEnroe in the '81 final. It is a record that he still holds.

"He was a great athlete," says Johan Kriek, a two-time Wimbledon quarterfinalist who made 13 main draw appearances. "He could move and run all day long and never seemed to tire. He was just tenacious."

For each opponent who dreaded the thought of trying to match wills with Borg, there was a starry-eyed contingent of women who were pining away just to get a look at the long-haired, headbanded "Viking god."

Boris Becker

- > Youngest Player to win Wimbledon, 1985
- > **3** titles and **7** finals appearances
- > First German to win Wimbledon



Johan Kriek Remembers seeing Boris Becker less than a year before Wimbledon, as he tried to qualify for an event in Johannesburg, South Africa. "I was flabbergasted," says Kriek. "He was good, but he was just out of his mind."

Several months later in June of 1985, Kriek would play Becker in the finals at Queens. "He proceeded to give me a lesson in serving," says Kriek. "I've never seen a guy that could serve you off the court like he did with angles."

The rest would be history, as Becker would send several long-standing records tumbling in his first Wimbledon main draw appearance. When he finished his fortnight, he was the talk of the tennis world, having become the youngest Wimbledon winner in history, the first unseeded player ever to win the title and the first German to ever win it as well.

In losing eight sets over seven matches, Becker also tied the record for most sets lost while winning the title.

Proving that he was no flash in the pan, Becker dominated Centre Court in the years to follow, reaching Wimbledon final in five of the next six years, winning two more titles and increasing his legend dramatically in the process.

Pete Sampras

- > Won **7** Titles in 8 Years from 1993 to 2000 (most in Open Era)
- > Most Years Seeded No. 1 (**8**)
- > Wimbledon Career Record: **63-7**



Pete Sampras once said that in a lot of ways he felt that he was born to win Wimbledon, and a lot of his opponents over the years must have felt the same way. It was Sampras' ascendance at Wimbledon that forced Boris Becker to step to the background. "He came up with a new type of power that was stronger (than mine)," says Boris Becker, who lost to Sampras all three times he faced him at Wimbledon, including the 1995 final. "I had the keys, but he did steal them from me."

From 1993 to 2000, the made-for-Wimbledon American won all but one title, and during that period became the all-time leader in Grand Slam titles as well as becoming the only male player to win Wimbledon seven times in the Open Era.

"To this day I think he had the best second serve of anybody," says Kriek. "His second serve was really what made him the best player in the world at the time." Martina Navratilova concurs. "He had the most amazing serve I think – ever," said Navratilova. "He could pull out aces with the second serve as well, and you didn't feel like it was a fluke when he got it."

Roger Federer

- > Second Male to win five consecutive Wimbledon Singles titles
- > Won **40** consecutive matches from 2003 to 2008
- > Owns **Six** Wimbledon Singles titles



Just as Sampras' rise pushed Becker to the fringe, Roger Federer's rise marked the end of Pete Sampras' imperious run as the king of Wimbledon Grass. Federer actually cut his teeth at Wimbledon with a fourth round upset over Pete Sampras in 2001, but it wasn't until 2003 that his dominance began in full.

Where a 17-year-old Boris Becker had lost eight sets in his first title run, a more mature Federer lost a mere eight sets in five years! From 2003 to 2007, Federer dominated Wimbledon like only Borg had done, winning five titles and facing very few threats from the field.

"All this is true," wrote David Foster Wallace, in a piece entitled "*Federer as Religious Experience*" for the New York Times in 2007, "and yet none of it really explains anything or evokes the experience of watching this man play. Of witnessing, firsthand, the beauty and genius of his game."

"He's the most complete player of all of us," said Marat Safin, just before he met him in a 2008 Wimbledon semifinal. "He has the greatest backhand, forehand, serve, volley, tactics – everything – he has everything that every player wants to have."

Later that year, Federer's 40-match winning streak would end at the hands of a determined lefty named Nadal. "The greatest match I've ever seen," said John McEnroe, who knows a thing about great matches on Wimbledon's Centre Court.

In 2009, Federer would reclaim his Wimbledon throne, when he beat Andy Roddick for his record-breaking 15th Grand Slam title.

Billie Jean King

- > **20** Titles: **6** Singles, **10** Doubles, **4** mixed
- > The Last Player to Win the Wimbledon Triple (Singles, Doubles and Mixed Titles) in 1973
- > Most Doubles Titles Open Era, **10**



In 1968, when The Open Era kicked off at Wimbledon, it was fitting that Billie Jean King was the first to win the Ladies' Singles title. The Ladies' Singles Champion earned 750 British Pounds – significantly less than half of what the men's champion earned – back then, but becoming a champion in a place that felt like home temporarily outweighed the mountain of sociopolitical challenges that still lay in front of Billie Jean at the time.

"With Wimbledon it was special, and some players have tournaments like that – places that are very special to them," says Rosie Casals, who won five Wimbledon Doubles titles with Billie Jean. "She loved and felt passionate about playing Wimbledon. All the tradition, all the history, she loved every part of that."

Nearly 40 years later, when Venus Williams called to Billie Jean from Centre Court after her 2007 title (the first year that Wimbledon awarded equal prize money to women!) it had all come full circle. Once again, it was fitting that Billie Jean was at Centre Court, the place where her star shone the brightest in her playing days.

Before she became a pioneer in the field of women's rights, Billie Jean was a masterful serve and volleyer with a game tailor-made for the closely cropped Wimbledon lawns. "At that time," says Casals, "the grass was faster."

Her athleticism, her grace under pressure and her finely cultivated strokes all made Billie Jean one of the greatest triple threats that Wimbledon has ever seen. Sharing the all-time lead for titles (20) is proof of that.

And her world-class volley didn't hurt either. "She was one of the greatest volleyers, period," says Casals.

Martina Navratilova

- > **20** titles: **9** singles, **7** doubles, **4** mixed
- > Oldest Wimbledon Champion (Mixed Doubles, **46**)
- > Played the Most Wimbledon Matches (**325**)



Martina Navratilova introduced a robust physical element to the classic serve-and-volley game that made her invincible for a 10-year stretch in which she won 8 Wimbledon singles titles.

"Martina is one of the great athletes of the sport," says Lori McNeil, a former Wimbledon semifinalist. "She brought such a physical presence. Her athleticism, the way she covered everything at the net, the coming forward and the aggressive style of her game. Billie Jean did it, and Martina took it to another level."

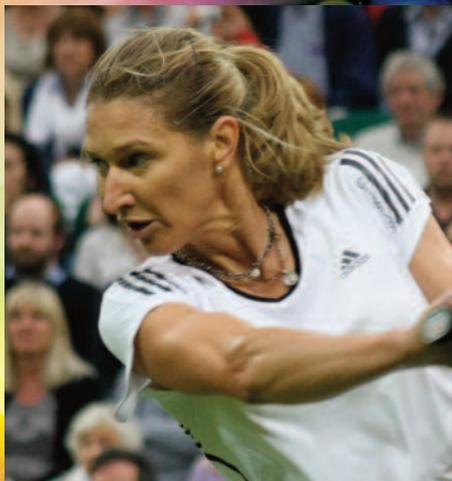
Did she ever. Martina holds the Wimbledon record for most singles titles (9), but her dominance might be better exemplified by the fact that she won Wimbledon four times without losing a single set. Nobody else has done that, and nobody else owned the grass like Martina.

"Obviously grass suited Martina," says McNeil. "She loved it, and when you have success like that, you walk on a certain surface and you just feel dominant. It's like home court advantage."

Much like Billie Jean King, Martina also resonated with the history of the Championships. "She had the same fascination and love for Wimbledon," says Rosie Casals. "I don't think there will be anybody that will beat Billie Jean's and Martina's record at Wimbledon (20 all-purpose titles), I just don't see it."

Steffi Graf

- > **7** Singles Titles in 9 Years, 1988-1996
- > Most Years Seeded No. 1, Along With Martina Navratilova & Margaret Court (**8**)
- > **74-7** Career Record in Wimbledon Singles



When Steffi Graf avenged her 1987 loss in the Wimbledon final to Martina Navratilova the very next year, there was a feeling that something special had occurred. In fact, it had.

While the Martina machine was losing steam, Steffi – supremely gifted and agile – was eager to fill the void. Graf would win four of the next five Wimbledon titles, quickly raising her total to five by 1993.

“Her slice backhand stayed so low on the grass, and she had a big forehand that was hard to read,” says Lori McNeil, who defeated Graf at Wimbledon in a legendary upset in 1994.

“That’s what made her tough to play. She moved well, and the extreme opposites of her shots was a great advantage to her.”

Graf would recover from the upset at the hands of McNeil and reclaim her dominance on the grass by winning her sixth and seventh titles successively in 1995 and 1996. In the end, she would finish her Wimbledon singles career with a stunning mark of 74-7. “She was one of the great frontrunners,” says McNeil. “If she built a lead she could just steamroll players.”

Just as Martina created a fitness revolution in tennis, Steffi made contributions of her own. “She’s probably one of the first females to really run around and hit inside-out forehands,” says McNeil. “They’re doing that now, but she’s really one of the first.”

Venus Williams

- > **5** Titles and **8** Finals Since 2000
- > **1** of **5** Female Single Champions to Save Match Point (2005, Davenport)
- > Won Longest Ladies Singles Final [2005] over Lindsay Davenport



As the only active female player on our list, Venus Williams still has the opportunity to add to her stellar Wimbledon résumé. The five-time Wimbledon singles champion also owns four doubles titles, and she’ll be a threat to win titles on the Wimbledon grass for as long as she plays.

“She plays much more aggressive on the grass, and she comes forward with ease (on grass) more than any other surface,” says McNeil. “I definitely think that if there’s one Slam that she has a chance to win a couple more times it would be Wimbledon.”

Venus, who has been a part of four all-sister finals at Wimbledon since 2002, has the big serve, the big groundies and the abilities at net to win – but can she get healthy enough to return to Championship form?

If she can, McNeil thinks she’ll benefit in the same way that Martina and Steffi benefited from their past successes. “Any time you win that much, if you go back to that place, you feel magical.” **T**