

Budge: First Night

By ALAN RINEHART



Donald is the one who cheerily waved his tennis racquet at Queen Mary at Wimbledon; but now the greatest amateur of them all must learn to bow to the paying guests.

THE ANGLE of view was deceptive. Either you looked down on the heads of the players, and saw them fictionized by the brilliant lights and implausible green playing surface, or you became fascinated by the continuous motion of spectators' heads from right to left and back to right again. All the women seemed to wear the same shade of red. This, of course, was Madison Square Garden, and Donald Budge taking all the hairpins out of the professional *coiffure* of Ellsworth Vines.

It seems a shame to produce at this point Ernest Truex's story of the cats. They were under the umpire's stand at Forest Hills, and one of them wanted to go home. But the other wouldn't. He said no, his father was in that racquet.

These tennis boys are trained like race-horses. At fifteen or so they may be rated exactly like three-year-olds in the Kentucky Derby. If in their early twenties they haven't shown the required speed, they might as well be put out at stud. But then, worse fates have befallen tennis players. A few, like the great Bill Johnston, have been runners-up most of their lives.

As I say, it was at the Garden. It is curious how much of this town's night-life seems to center there. My impression of that entire swivel-necked crowd of nearly seventeen thousand (who paid, if we are accurate, forty-seven grand for the privilege) was of a New York night-life divided. Half of them had never missed a stage play; half of them had never seen one. I don't know which half I liked better.

A few of us, up in the press box, at times were thrilled. There was some great tennis. More of that later. But on my right was a Swedish girl with almost no understanding of English, nor of my intentions when I spoke to her. She wanted some pictures, too, but who in the world could find his photographer when the man had got loose in the Garden? He and I did meet later, but by then the lady had gone.

On the other side of me sat a middle-aged man with a battery of telegraph instruments. No more of that later at all.

There must be some sort of a *code diplomatique* among these professionals. In that so unprepossessing dressing-room where Vines

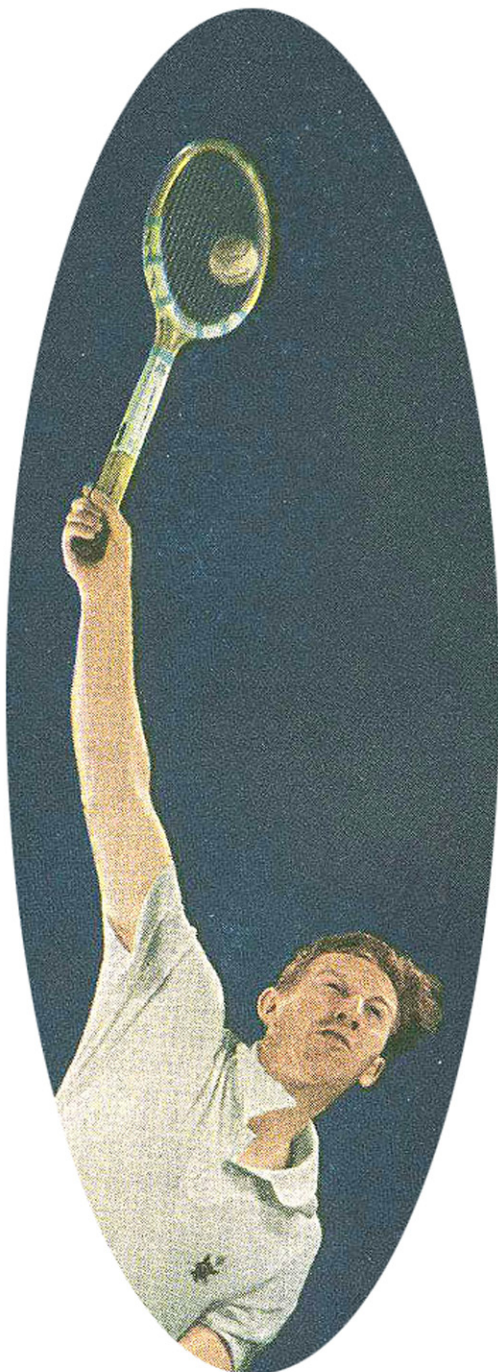


and Budge changed—barefoot on concrete, one shower, nobody to keep out that loose photographer or me, nor others—they who were about to die saluted each other with maximum grace. Half the time the door was open, what with exits and entries, and no more than a thousand spectators passed by. And here's where I got the idea of race-horses. Like the great blooded winners; none of them has what you could call a magnificent body. Apparently, to have a Charles Atlas torso is to be musclebound. Their partners, Bruce Barnes and Dick Skeen, fall into the same classification. As statues none of them would be exhibited in the Bronx Zoo. But the play of their long slack muscles, their exquisite coördination (even when soaping up) are a wonder to watch. Mostly I had to watch the loose photographer. I wanted a shot of Budge's lean and whiskery shanks, which seemed to me the items which carry him to victory, as Vines' back and Perry's arm do; but Budge said: "That's nonsense." Probably it was.

The whole backstage performance was very quiet. Few of us, I expect, have ever watched Bernhardt (or even Roosevelt) dress for an occasion which might make history; however, the boys got dressed, each, in fresh clothes which he had brought wrapped in a towel under his arm; and then put on new sneakers. Don wore the most expensive flannel trousers I have ever seen. They answered questions and posed for flash photos. When called, they took their racquets out of cellophane wrappers, and went out to a certain amount of glory.

Budge is twenty-four. He seems to have been brought up on those vertical vitamins which they give to dress models; something like size 12 across and size 18 in height. Ranging upward in describing him, as one has to, from a ripply stomach to a staunch collar-button emplacement, you look in vain for those tremendous muscles which a lazy world expects from its great athletes. Vines is the same. However, when either of them closes his fist on a tennis racquet, he has the forearm of Popeye the Sailor. Budge swings a fifteen-and-a-half-ounce bat.

Top the picture with a long nose, a face full of humor, no pose of any sort—even a deference to the opinions of the silliest among you—and you have Budge. If simplicity is a

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sign of greatness, there it is. Right up to the roots of that incredible copper-wire hair. From there on he burns like the flame on a candle.

Kids in California, in some parts of which you can actually heave a rock at a bird without breaking a window, regard tennis as part of their birthright. We in the East thought ourselves lucky to find a vacant lot for baseball; and the result shows. Budge started at the age of nine. Moreover, out there tennis is not a rich man's game. If it had been, we shouldn't have had Budge, with his clean sweep of all the amateur honors of the world, from Davis Cup to Wimbledon and Forest Hills.

That makes all the more sporting the action of the Davis Cup Committee in handing him their blessing as a professional, for thereby America's chances are shortened. They have given him every support and encouragement, because they want to see the youngster cash in while he is at the top of his form. For a moment the sports world was staggered; nothing short of the New York State Boxing Commission can be as tough as any committee of amateurs.

YOU KNOW the story. The excitement out front was intense. Both lads, warming up, were hitting them into the net to find the low range under the strange lights; and after the gloom of that dressing-room they must have been dazzled. But even at that, the crowd was keen. Garden audiences are wonderful. They would love even a champion cockroach, provided he—or she—were a champion. They thought the boys were making mistakes just to show how good they could be later on. The loose photographer vanished, in his loose way; and I settled down between the Swede and what must have been the General Electric Company. The racinorses halted at the barrier; and were off.

Hitting hard all the way, just missing the corners and sidelines which are his specialty. Vines took a beating from what this observer

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thinks is the finest tennis combination ever seen. Combined in Budge are all the physical characteristics which we, who pay \$2.20, expect to see. Plus the spirit. The spirit seemed to have left Vines. But remember: he is a man slow to wrath; and I believe one day he will rise up in his mighty fury and, just for a change, massacre the redhead. Particularly if the redhead has heard a new piece of swing music.

The score was three straight sets, out of a possible five, with figures reading 6-3, 6-4, 6-2.

There's a note on swing music. Budge loves it. That same coordination of mind and action which you saw on the court goes into his daily life, probably even into the way he eats an egg. Mentally, I am sure, he is dancing all the time.

Once down in Florida he asked me: "What goes 99-boomp, 99-boomp?" When I didn't know, he said it was a centipede with a wooden leg. But when I invited him to join the Dumb Club, a local organization of certain of us who don't as a rule think straight, he was deeply offended.

