

Unretiring Seniors / The Boys and Girls of Wimbledon / An Art in Acoustics
Profile: John Amerman of Mattel / Interactive Games / Germany: The Best of the *Wurst*

SKY

magazine ® JUNE 1990

DELTA -The Official Airline of Walt Disney World and Disneyland



THE WINDMILLS OF OUR TIMES

Story begins on page 10

The Boys and Girls of Wimbledon

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIC MINTON

Steffi Graf did not want to wait. The top-seeded women's tennis player had arrived at Wimbledon's Court 3 for her second-round match, but her opponent, Karine Quentrec, was late, and the prematch warm-up time was wasting away.

So, Graf handed one of her rackets to a ballgirl, Penny Joannou. The teenager shyly took the court against the world's number one and engaged her in five rallies, a couple lasting at least a half-dozen shots, until Quentrec at last arrived.

"I was so embarrassed," Joannou said later, not about her playing skills so much as the attention she drew. Indeed, after Graf dispensed with Quentrec 6-1, 6-0, reporters and photographers jostled each other for a bead on the ballgirl, not the eventual Wimbledon champion.

What is more noteworthy, though, is how the other ballgirls on the Court 3 team reacted. While their colleague was matching groundstrokes with Graf, they were retrieving balls, holding and bouncing them to the players as if nothing unusual were happening. In short, they were doing their jobs, and if nobody took note it was because they were doing their jobs perfectly.

They are supposed to be anonymous. The ballboys and ballgirls in the annual Lawn Tennis Championships beginning the last week of this month at the All-England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon blend into the course of

With her opponent late for their second-round match at Wimbledon in 1988, Steffi Graf didn't want to waste valuable warm-up time. So she handed a racket to ballgirl Penny Joannou, right.



They are supposed to be anonymous, their purple and green uniforms blending into the lawn courts and green tarp backdrops. But the efficiency of these ballboys and ballgirls has quietly earned the respect of both players and the public.



action just as their purple and green uniforms blend into the lawn courts and green tarp backdrops. Their efficiency is such, however, that they have earned the universal respect and admiration of the players and have started drawing the public's attention, too.

"Years ago when I first started, we probably had maybe a couple people want to do [press] interviews through the fortnight," said Wally Wonfor, Wimbledon's ballboy manager. "It's becoming now where you're probably doing two interviews per day. People seem to notice the ballboys and girls more. But I don't know whether that's a good thing or not."

Wonfor can say that because he is the man responsible for annually turning a group of 125 midteens into efficient-to-the-point-of-invisible ballboys and girls. Nevertheless, his ability to do just that has earned his charges an honored place among Wimbledon's ensconced traditions, in company with the grass courts, the royal box, and the strawberries and cream.

Advertisers recognize that. A soft-drink vendor once featured a ballboy in its television commercials during Wimbledon, while a tennis-ball company fittingly used the ballboy image to illustrate their advertising slogan, "hand-picked by experts since 1902."

On the Center and Number 1 courts,

Above left, Joannou returned Graf's racket only after engaging the top-seeded women's player in five rallies. Later, it was Joannou that drew the attention of reporters and photographers, left.

That Wimbledon's ballboys and girls are serving the world's top players in tennis' most prestigious event is a consolation to be weighed against the pressures.

Wimbledon's two primary show courts, umpires may come and go unheralded, but spectators always warmly applaud the ballboys when they first parade into view.

"That's because we're the first ones to come out and it means that play will be starting soon," said Jon Bedford, who was captain of the Center Court ballboy team in 1985, the year Boris Becker won his first Wimbledon title. For Bedford, though, leading his team onto the Center Court lawn on the first day remains the most vivid memory of his two-week ballboy career.

"It was fairly late in the afternoon because it had been raining," he said. "I was the first one out, and when people saw me appear — people who had waited all day — the place just erupted. All I can remember is the television camera training in on me. Then it was down to business."

"Down to business" may seem an understatement truly befitting Wimbledon's British breeding, but only the setting makes the job glamorous. The business itself is tedious. It scrapes knees, invites bruises, and makes young backs ache.

They must pick up mishit balls, doing so on the run and without fumbling. They must hold three or four balls in one hand. They must roll balls in a perfect line to the ends of the courts. They must bounce balls to the server with such precision the player can catch it without looking. They must change balls every ninth game, gathering the old set and putting into play the new, quickly and without mixing them up.

They must work four out of every six hours of play on the outside courts, which could mean four-hour shifts on some days, and all day on the two show courts, with reserves rotating in. By contrast, the umpires work one-hour shifts, and scoreboard keepers only about two. When no scorekeeper is on hand, the ballboys and girls must operate the scoreboard.

They must endure getting hit by wayward Ivan "Rocket" Lendl, Boris "Boom



Boom" Becker, or canon-firing Steffi Graf shots, and do so without yelping. They must endure the occasional verbal abuse from players, too, without answering back.

Within a few minutes of that glorious moment when he first led his team onto Center Court, Bedford found himself on the angry side of defending champion John McEnroe's tongue. "He shouted at me on the first ball change, which was fair because I was a bit slow," says Bedford.

That Wimbledon's ballboys and girls are serving the world's top players in tennis' most prestigious event is a consolation to be weighed against the pressures. A ballboy's mistake could cost a player a point, game, set, match, title, and thousands of dollars in prize money. While ridding players of anything that could distract attention from the game, ballboys and girls must not become a distraction themselves.

One ballboy on Center Court a few years ago was stung in the mouth by a

During play, centers crouch motionless by the net. But when a ball hits the net, a center bolts into action.

wasp during play. He waited until the first break in the game to quietly leave the court. It wasn't until he reached the dressing room that he let loose the tears, a stoicism most men and women could never match.

Wonfor, with help from physical-education teachers, starts his task of choosing and shaping this special breed of boy and girl in January when he sends letters to 13 local schools, inviting volunteers. The schools send ten boys and ten girls each, amounting to some 180 kids, since a few schools are not co-ed. Wimbledon first integrated their ballboy teams in 1977, and selections for both the whole

After an eight-week training period with the drilling and perfection-demanding Wally Wonfor, the ballboys and girls are well-conditioned to survive a McEnroe tongue-lashing or a Lendl stare.

corps and the elite show-court teams are based strictly on ability, Wonfor said.

Each school might get 200 volunteers, so it's a process to whittle down the list of candidates. Wonfor wants not only the fittest students, but the academically sound and well-behaved, too. He then puts the kids through a fitness circuit and other tests (such as relay races in which they must pick up tennis balls) to choose his final corps of 120. He's looking for stamina and speed, as well as the proper attitude.

"Temperament is the most important thing you look for in a ballboy and ballgirl," he said. "They have to stand there and smile and take in the abuse." However, after the eight-week training period, four days a week, two hours a day, with the drilling and perfection-demanding Wonfor, the ballboys and girls are well-conditioned to survive a McEnroe tongue-lashing or a Lendl stare.

During the first three weeks of training, the ballboys and girls are sent in groups to three centers to work through repetitious drills on the basic skills of "ballboying," as the students and staff themselves call it.

After three weeks of endless drills on skills, the ballboys and girls are taken to Wimbledon and first shown around. For many this is their first visit to the grounds, and the tour is meant to get them over the awe inspired by Wimbledon's hallowed environment.

The week before the fortnight of play, the players arrive and practice on the grounds, so the ballboys and girls have a chance to move and practice among the stars. By the time the first round of the championships begin, they have practiced in game situations and Wonfor has selected his teams.

Four ballboys or girls make up a team on the outside courts – two at the centers and one at each end. The two show courts have six members on the court – two at the centers and two at each end – with an additional two kept in reserve.

The Center Court team is the elite, and to watch them work is to see an exemplary operation of precision and concentration. When a ball hits the net, a center is sprinting for it before it even drops to the ground. He picks up the loose ball and is squatting by the net again before the player has even turned around for the next service.



Wonfor is responsible for turning a group of 125 teens into efficient-to-the-point-of-invisible ballboys and girls. Here, he gives some corrective instruction.

Before a judge's "out" call can echo back across the court, the service-end baseline ballboys either have their hands up with a ball ready to bounce to the player, or their empty hands showing.

Like contraband, balls are passed from center to baseline ballboy behind backs without a word spoken, or under the net

from center to center. On service changes, balls are torpedoed from one end to the other, and centers roll balls so true they hit the baseline boy's toes.

These are things the most observant fan notices – but so much more goes on.

"You live with the other guys for two weeks," said Bedford about the Center Court team he captained, "and after a while we just clicked. We used to get signals flying around the team. If you'd see a bloke that didn't know what was going on, you'd signal to him to get him back into the situation."

They may be the elite in skill and play on Wimbledon's center stage, but the Center Court squad is otherwise just another team in the ballboy/ballgirl fraternity. Those assigned the outside courts wear the same uniform and carry the same prestige. Bedford, in fact, accorded the outside teams more respect. "They have to work a lot harder than I did," he said.

His schoolmate, Alan Machado, also a ballboy in 1985, agreed. "I nearly played on every court," he said. "Everybody always wants to be on Center Court, but there are advantages and disadvantages. In the first week, the outside courts always have more interesting matches, but in the second week it gets a bit tedious because you have to do the juniors."

Wimbledon is the tennis players' Valhalla, and in such paradise, ballboys and girls display more than wings on their feet when they answer the players' every beck and call. During court changeovers, when the competitors rest by the umpire's chair, the centers stand at military parade rest in front of the players and serve them drinks from the dispenser behind the umpire's chair on request. They must wait on the players even during ball changes.

This service sometimes goes beyond waitressing. One year, when Barbara Potter changed shirts, she had two ballgirls hold up towels front and back.

MESH



MESS



Ordinary pool covers are unsightly—and unsafe. Loop-Loc mesh covers stay dry, safe and great-looking all year long. And go on and off in minutes. Discover the difference: send for free POOL COVER SURVIVAL GUIDE from Loop-Loc, Ltd., 1585 Sycamore Ave., Bohemia, NY 11716.

© 1990, Loop-Loc, Ltd.

LOOP-LOC

SARASOTA CAN REALLY ADD TO YOUR VACATION!

Introducing



Stay 3 consecutive days or more in Florida's Sarasota area and get an additional night's stay absolutely free!

Add to this the world's whitest beaches...tropical Gulf Coast islands...tantalizing blue-green waters and golden sunsets, and the sensational Sarasota area can really add to your vacation. Call or write for more information.

SARASOTA

THE SARASOTA AREA & ITS GULF COAST ISLANDS
655 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, Florida 34236

1-800-522-9799

*What entices them to endure grass burns
on their knees and sunburns on their scalps are
mostly the intangible qualities ...*

One could ask if she would have pulled such a stunt if ballboys were working that court or not, but the ballboys would no doubt have obliged Potter with proper decorum.

When Graf needed a warm-up partner, a ballgirl obliged. This was not the first time a player used a ballperson for a pre-match knockabout. In 1987, Martina Navratilova had a late-arriving opponent on Center Court and played against a ballboy for five minutes.

Frew McMillan took ballboy participation a step further in 1979. During a mixed doubles match on Center Court, he became so frustrated with his play that, after missing one point, he handed his racket to a center ballboy. The boy looked uncertain for a moment, but as McMillan crouched down in the ballboy's place, the boy walked onto the court. At your service.

Such incidents happen once in a fortnight for the once-in-a-lifetime ballboys and girls. What entices them to endure grass burns on their knees and sunburns on their scalps, sore spines and hurt egos, long, tedious drills and longer, more vexing games, are mostly the intangible qualities — the chance to shake the hand of a duke, duchess, or even a princess, the association with some of the world's most famous sportsmen and women, the honor of playing a small but vital and revered role in tennis' most prestigious event.

"Just the atmosphere is worth being a part of," said Machado. "It's enough just to be a ballboy."

"If you walk around in your ballboy T-shirt you cause a stir," said Bedford. "English people will see it and say, 'There is a Wimbledon ballboy.'"

"The thing I liked," added Machado, "was the drink machine in the changing room. My belly was always full of fluid."

Well, these are kids, remember. And there are a few perks ballboys and girls are entitled to other than the intangibles of honor and a handshake. They get to keep the uniform, which for some entre-

preneurial types is a valuable commodity. Tourists at Wimbledon will buy the shirt off a ballboy's back: the going rate is about \$300.

Before the fortnight, many kids fancy ballboying for the chance to watch the stars play tennis at Wimbledon up-close and free. But once the tournament starts, ballboys and girls learn otherwise.

"The first one or two games you aren't used to ballboying and you tend to stare at the players," said Machado. "You start to make mistakes and the players shout at you, then you get used to them and start doing your job." However, when their duty is done, the ballboys and girls have the best access to obtaining players' autographs.

Then there are the gifts and goodies the players leave around. Some pass out sweatbands; others hand a racket over to a ballboy or girl who captured their particular admiration. Billie Jean King always left a jar of candy for the ballboys. Others leave cards and thank-you notes. Almost all leave their high opinions.

"I'm only repeating what players say, that [Wimbledon's ballboys and girls] are the best in the world," said Wonfor. "I suppose they should know, really."

A few of Wimbledon's ballboys and girls might aspire to be Wimbledon champions someday, but most have, by being selected to wear the purple and green uniforms, achieved what they see as the ultimate contribution to professional tennis. Besides, who envies whom?

At the ladies' final on Center Court in 1985, one baseline ballboy grew ill and slipped off the court during a change-over, leaving his position unfilled. When Martina Navratilova walked from her chair to the service line, she noticed the missing ballboy, ran to his position, and pretended to take his place.

Perhaps, then, some Wimbledon champions just might wish to be Wimbledon ballboys or girls.

Writer Eric Minton is based in Anderson, South Carolina. ☺