





# *Splendor on the Grass*

AT THE LONGWOOD CRICKET CLUB OUTSIDE BOSTON,  
CLUB PRESIDENT CHRISTINE A. CREELMAN RALLIES WITH PRO BUD SCHULTZ. THE  
CHÂTEAU-LIKE CLUBHOUSE SEEMS ENTIRELY  
APPROPRIATE TO AMERICA'S GREATEST BASTION OF LAWN TENNIS.

By John Sedgwick  
*Photograph by Jan Staller*

Commentators have likened the Longwood Cricket Club to the Holy Roman Empire even though, in truth, L.C.C. is somewhat smaller, and its reign has not been quite as long. But the two have a similar problem with their names. Just as the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, Roman nor an empire, L.C.C. is not in Longwood, nor is it a cricket club.

No, Longwood is a tennis club. But that is a bit like saying that Jack Nicholson is an actor. Longwood is exclusively, purely, devotedly, rabidly a tennis club, with the largest collection of grass courts, twenty-four altogether, in the United States. For the Longwood club members, tennis is more than a game. It is more than a religion. It is practically a psychiatric disorder. Nothing short of bad weather is allowed to interfere with the free expression of their fanaticism. While other tennis clubs might offer golf or polo as a diversion for the membership, Longwoodians would never waste their precious space on such idle pursuits. The club does, in fact, have a swimming pool on the property, but only because the space in question is too small to fit another court. As it is, the club crams sixteen clay courts along with the twenty-four grass courts (and stadium) onto its square ten-acre plot in the plush Boston suburb of Chestnut Hill.

The clay courts are pleasant enough, but it is the grass courts that make the Longwoodians' hearts beat faster. Looking out, drink in hand, from the broad porch of the majestic, stucco-sided clubhouse on a palmy summer evening, one might be seeing an emerald green oasis. The courts stretch out side by side by side by side clear to the copper beech on Dunster Road several hundred yards away. The balls sail back and forth in the warm air. The players dash about the turf in their sparkling tennis whites, for nothing but white may be worn on the Longwood courts. "The white looks wonderful against the green," explains the club's former president, Axel Kaufmann, a Boston architect. "It makes a very harmonious appearance. It's restful." With that blanket of grass to muffle harsher noises, the only sound one hears is the gentle *pok* of racket strings striking balls and a few hosannas of praise for a winning shot.

Founded in 1877, Longwood is, as clubmen like to say, the oldest "significant" tennis club in the United States. Significant, in this case, means significant to tennis. The Merion Cricket Club—another misnamed tennis club—outside Philadelphia was begun in 1865, but, while tennis has done a lot for it, it hasn't done nearly as much for tennis as Longwood has. According to some historians, Longwood's Dr. James Dwight erected America's first tennis court, back when Longwood itself was still consumed with cricket, at the country estate of William Appleton, in Nahant. Around the club, Dwight is referred to as "the father of American tennis." Longwood was certainly the scene of the first interclub match, in which a Brookline team defeated a team from Philadelphia in 1883, 2-1. Longwood's Dwight Davis established the Davis Cup in 1900, and the first Cup matches were played at the club. L.C.C.'s longtime doyenne, Hazel Wightman, a.k.a. "Lady Tennis," founded a female version of the Davis Cup, the Wightman Cup, in 1923. Longwood inaugurated television coverage of tennis in 1963, enlisting the club's own Bud Collins as the

announcer on the local public television station, WGBH. In 1967, it sponsored the first professional tournament in the United States. And, now that Forest Hills has dropped the U.S. Open, Longwood is about the only private club in the country to stage a regular national tournament, which it does by presenting the U.S. Pro Championships every summer in its 8,000-seat stadium.

Club founders James P. Farley, H.F. Fay and John Hubbard undoubtedly had none of this in mind when they assembled a group of twenty-five fellow cricketers to play a little cricket on a grassy corner of the 600-acre Sears estate one warm day in 1877. They might well have hesitated if they had, for tennis snuffed out their favorite game.

The founders named their cricket club Longwood after the property of the Searses, who had, in turn, named the estate after Napoleon's home in exile on St. Helena. (The Sears property was located across from what is now Beth Israel Hospital in the medical district of Boston.) Family patriarch David Sears had always admired Napoleon, and he had decorated his private residence with Napoleonic flourishes, including a prominent pair of capital Ns.

Tennis crept onto the grounds the very next year, in 1878. The club minutes record that a committee was provided with money to acquire "two sets of tennis," as the equipment was then termed. In those early days, tennis was rather a makeshift game, a little like backyard badminton. The rules had been standardized only a year before, eliminating such odd regulations as the awarding of a point to the server if the receiver touched a serve that was out. Strokes were tentative: The overhead serve was by no means universal, volleys were tapped rather than fully stroked, and the lob was considered a dastardly innovation when it appeared at the national championships some years later. And the equipment varied widely. Some used what might have been oversized squash balls made of plain India rubber; others employed balls covered with hand-sewn flannel. In the version of one prominent tennis promoter, Major Walter Clopton Wingfield, the court was narrower at the net than at the baseline, like a bodice cinched at the waist. Wingfield's game was the one originally played at Longwood.

Although tennis quickly overtook cricket as the main club sport, the members did not think to alter the club's name to reflect that fact. In his charming history of Longwood, *One Hundred Years of Longwood*, Robert Minton speculates that tennis might have been considered too "sissy" to be recognized in the title of any self-respecting social organization. He notes that boys passing by the courts used to tease the players by squealing "love" in effeminate voices. Also, the club's founders were all cricketers, and they may have remained loyal to their game.

The layout of the club reflected the intensity of the members' dedication to their tennis. That and standard Yankee parsimony. There was no clubhouse to speak of, just a forty-foot shed that looked like it had started life as a mobile home. It had locker rooms on either side and a small bar and a pro shop in the middle. The changing facilities offered no shower, merely a shallow tub for bathing. The minutes record that such a tub was directed to be purchased "at an expense not to exceed \$7." Ventilation was

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poor, and tennis togs grew so fragrant that, by one account, they were burned in a great bonfire at the end of one season.

These austere conditions produced America's first great tennis champion, Richard Sears, the grandson of estate-owner David Sears. He won the national title at Newport an astonishing seven times in a row, and he was the first of what would be eight national men's titleholders from Longwood. (The club has produced four national titleholders on the women's side, paced by the inestimable Hazel Wightman, who won four times.) Teamed with "Father Tennis," Dr. James Dwight, Sears won five doubles titles as well. But his tennis career was curtailed when Dwight accidentally hit him in the back of the neck with either a ball or his racket, depending on which account one believes, during a doubles match in the late 1880s. Sears' neck stiffened so badly that he played little afterward, and he routinely watched tennis matches from seats at the end of the court rather than on the side, where he would have to turn his head to follow the ball.

Longwood's Dwight Davis brought the club more lasting fame when, as a 21-year-old Harvard junior, he thought up the idea of modeling an international tennis competition after the America's Cup yacht races. He ordered up a thirteen-inch cup from Shreve, Crump & Low at his own expense, and arranged to have the world's first international tennis match played against the British at Longwood in August, 1900. Davis himself played for the Americans and led the team to a 3-0 victory before a crowd of 1,200; he left his opponents muttering about his high-kicking American twist serve. "The balls . . . came at you like an animated egg-plum," one Britisher complained afterward. The matches were played intermittently at Longwood for the next few years until New York's West Side Tennis Club, then in the Bronx, picked them up in 1911. The competition returned to the club infrequently after that, and was last played at Longwood in 1959.

As Boston expanded, the land on the old Longwood estate became too valuable for the Searses to commit to a tennis club, and in 1911 the L.C.C. appropriated the struggling Chestnut Hill Club, which possessed some clay courts and a clubhouse on five acres of land. Over the next few years, Longwood acquired an adjoining five-acre parcel, laid out new grass and clay courts of its own and rolled the old Chestnut Hill Club's clubhouse on a temporary railroad track to a more advantageous site by the courts. The club officially moved into the new expanded quarters beside the Worcester Turnpike in 1922.

Longwood added a permanent stadium for viewing tournament play in 1928, and the swimming pool in 1939. Since then, the club has remained virtually unchanged, which is just the way the club members want it. When someone timorously proposed that a clay court be turned into an all-weather surface some years ago, the suggestion was, says Club Manager David Bianco, "beaten down mercilessly." It was a momentous enough shift when the parking lot was expanded by 25 percent. In 1985, the membership began debating whether to convert two grass courts into clay courts. Everyone realized that clay is more practical, but few could bear the thought of cutting back on the grass; and when the Court Mix Issue, as the question was termed, finally came to a vote last year, the pro-clay contingent was soundly defeated.

Essentially, Longwood is holy ground for those who worship tennis—the purest kind of tennis, that is. Lawn tennis. It is different from any other kind. There is, first of all, the sheer, wonderful aesthetic of all that deep green grass. It is so much cleaner than dusty clay, so much more restful than glazed concrete. Then there is the way that the grass seems to absorb everything—the sounds of exertion, the heat, even the ball itself as it skids along the court. Grass players quickly learn to bend their knees and shorten their strokes to accommodate the slick surface, flicking the ball back rather than fully stroking it. But older players swear the grass has a rejuvenating effect, bringing back a serve-and-volley power game they hadn't played in years.

This sacred grove has its various attendant priests. The club pro, Bud Schultz, a former ranked professional, is certainly one of them. The members give him the rapt attention of the devout when he gives his lessons. The club's former president, Axel Kaufmann, is another. Then there is Paul Noonan, the club's "host," who, wearing a pith helmet, no less, to keep the sun off, acts as the club's traffic controller, directing members to their courts.

At Longwood, members cannot sign up for a court in advance. They wait for Noonan to assign them one.

He is also astute at arranging games for those who need a partner.

But, most important of all, there is the groundskeeper. For nearly all of the club's first century, the grass courts were tended by a single family, the Chamberses. John Isaacs ("Ike") Chambers was lured to Longwood from his home in Nottingham, England, in 1884. Originally hired to be the club's cricket coach, he tended the club's grass on the side, and concentrated exclusively on it when cricket passed from the scene in 1911. In a kind of apostolic succession, he passed the job on to his sons, first to Charles, then to Walter. Upon Walter Chambers' retirement in 1975, the groundskeeper's job finally shifted out of the family and was taken over by Mike Humphrey, who holds the position still.

Longwood's worshipers consist of old-time loyalists and more recent converts. Members of the Sears family still belong to the club. Dr. Richard Dwight, grandson of the exalted father of American tennis, is on the roster as well. And there is a core of solid Bostonian stock—Codmans, Ellises, Lees and Rowbothams—who have held their memberships for generations. Beyond that, the club is sprinkled with families from new contexts, such as Mr. and Mrs. William Bain of Bain and Company; Walter and Sue Cahners of Cahners Publishing; the developer Harold Brown; Dr. Jerome Grossman, known for his fundraising for the Democratic party; and the aforementioned sportswriter and tennis broadcaster Bud Collins.

And, of course, the holy ground is the turf itself. On hot days, members sometimes play barefoot, and that is a truly heavenly sensation. Surprisingly, the grass was never planted; it was at Longwood before Longwood was. Called annual bluegrass (*poa annua*), it is tough, like a humane version of Astroturf. The grass thrives on close cropping, reseeds itself every spring and grows with the tenacity of crab grass. "If we didn't like it," says Mike Humphrey, "we'd have a terrible time trying to get rid of it."

Fortunately, the Longwood members do like it. They like it very, very much. □

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