



ALL ABOUT TRADITION: Only at Wimbledon do winners receive the trophy from a member of the royal family. In 1979, the Duke of Kent presented the winner's trophy to Bjorn Borg.

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THIS week in London, like a summer ritual, the questions will rain. Does this tournament mean the most to you? It is meant as a rhetorical question really, and it is a conceited one. Still, players will play along and say "Yes", whereupon they will be asked: "Why is this place special?" And here, too, it is understood, no argument is expected, this place is special. After all, this is Wimbledon.

Not every player has genuflected on command, especially those rebellious young foreigners. Like John McEnroe, who wrote that as a teenager at Wimbledon in 1977, he thought: "How could anyone expect me to take all this strawberries and cream malarkey seriously?" And Connors, the blue-collar hero, said: "New Yorkers love it when you spill your guts out there. Spill your guts at Wimbledon and they make you stop and clean it up."

But they came around. Now they gush. Most players do.

Wimbledon is the ultimate destination of every young tyro from distant lands, who are raised with tales of history and tradition that personify this oldest of Slams (which began in 1877).

Federer was so anxious on his first visit, so overcome at having made it to Wimbledon finally, that he couldn't serve. Wimbledon, he said, "can be very intimidating. The white (clothes), the tra-

Wimbledon still the game's biggest prize

Even McEnroe and Connors grew to appreciate this unique grasscourt tournament, the oldest Slam of all

dition, the fans, the grass, the whole thing, it's a tough, tough package."

This seduction extends to the casual spectator. He may be uninterested in the relative merits of Rebound Ace and Deco Turf, yet will expound expertly on curtsying, royalty, weather delays and the virtues of Robinsons' barley water.

For many, tennis starts and ends here, and unsurprisingly the story of tennis is recollected through episodes at Wimbledon. Connors may have won five US Opens, but Wimbledon is where he bullied Rosewall (1974) and was chastised by Ashe (1975). Lendl reached eight consecutive US Open finals but not winning Wimbledon is what many, unfairly perhaps, remember.

It is where Becker launched power tennis (1985), Agassi began to be taken seriously after winning his first Slam (1992) and the

legend of Borg (1976-80) was born (so what if he won six French). It is where Cash walked on people's heads (1987), Pete walked on water (1993-95, 1997-2000) and Navratilova walked over the opposition nine times (1978-79, 1982-87, 90).

Everything else is secondary. It came to the point where Wimbledon was not just the "nursery of the game", as A Wallis Myer wrote, but it was also "the final assessor of form". As if only winning here gave a champion legitimacy, and there is a truth and a conceit to this.

Wimbledon is modern (it has redone its press centre, its No 1 court, and is putting a roof over centre court, but it does everything at its own pace), yet it is defined by its traditions. Its value lies in its old world charm, its white clothes, its dignified manner. It is occasionally "classist" yet

somehow classy.

Arthur Ashe put it neatly in one of his Wimbledon diaries when he wrote:

"British traditions are just a bit more traditional than anybody else's. Given a head start the British can always make their things seem more important than anybody else's. Wimbledon, for instance, is known here as 'The Championships', which is one of the great pre-emptive titles in the world. How do you top that?"

Tradition is also good business. The more we are assaulted by the excesses and vulgarities of modern sport, the more we crave Wimbledon. Even for players, it is a brief journey into another uni-



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verse. We're so tired of preening stars and officials gloating about some mega-trillion TV deal that we're ready to buy into all this hushed-cathedral stuff. Hell, even when Cliff Richard gets pulled out when it rains, we crack a grin.

Grass did not make Wimbledon unique for once every Slam but the French was on turf. Yet when the US (first clay, 1975; then Deco Turf 1978) and the Australian (Rebound Ace, 1988) altered their surfaces, Wimbledon became even more exclusive. No one plays any more on grass (there is no season any more), but again it is its foreignness (the weather plays havoc with rhythm) that makes it both attractive, and a challenge.

But Wimbledon is suffering, too. It was the theatre for the art of serve and volley, but the art has died. Now watching players labour from the baseline there is like going to La Scala in Milan and hearing a Hollywood musical.

An era of Hewitt-Nalbandian finals (the 2002 final had not one serve and volley point) would have punished the senses, but a Swiss fellow alone has rescued Wimbledon. He can volley, wore an old-fashioned white jacket last year, plays and behaves immaculately. Federer needs the French to confirm his greatness, but what matters to the All England Club is which trophy means the most to him. Wimbledon.