Covering the Open

Australia's top tennis writer, Alan Trengove, looks back at more than 50 years spent covering the Australian Open

People are always asking me how they can become a tennis writer. They rather fancy the idea of being paid to watch the Australian Open every January, and travelling the globe at other times soaking up the sun. It seems so much more civilized than working for a living.

The fact is, most of us who record the deeds of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and other champions didn't plan our lives this way. Usually, we began as a reporter and later grabbed a fleeting opportunity to specialise in tennis.

My own career commenced in 1952 in a dreary room at Melbourne's Spencer Street station. I was then a 22-year-old Western roundsman, a job that sounds as though it might have had something to do with cowboys – but no such luck!

I was just a lowly newspaperman covering the Western end of Melbourne, where a large number of trade union offices were located. My round of duties could be hectic whenever there was a train or tram strike, but also could be awfully dull at other times.

The old railway station, now known as Southern Cross, served as a base for Western round reporters, and on this particular day I overheard my colleague John Dean telling someone on the phone that the tennis and golf writer for the *Melbourne Argus* had just married an heiress and had promptly retired. Dean, later one of Melbourne's leading booksellers, said he'd been offered the job, and had turned it down.

'Do you mind if I put in for it?' I asked eagerly when he hung up. 'Not at all,' he said. 'I'm sure it's yours for the asking.'

And so within a month I was reporting on both sports. And, in less than a year, I covered my first Grand Slam tournament, the Australian championships at Kooyong. In the years since I have watched the tournament grow to become the immensely popular mass spectacle it is today.

To compound my lucky break, the 1953 titles were the most significant for many a year, for they heralded the arrival in big-time tennis of Ken Rosewall, one of our greatest champions (and my secret, long-time hero). The previous top players in Australia, Frank Sedgman and Ken McGregor, had recently turned professional, an act that virtually turned them into sporting pariahs, as it disqualified them from contesting future national and state championships; in that era such events were exclusively reserved for amateurs – or 'shamateurs' as cynics dubbed them.

By consensus, Sedgman's heir apparent was believed to be not Rosewall but the net-rushing Victorian left-hander Mervyn Rose, whose game thrived on grass courts. Rose was several years older than the 18-year-old Rosewall, and far more experienced. He was bigger, too.

Rosewall, ironically dubbed 'Muscles' because of a perceived deficiency in that department, was so boyish and so shy in facing the press, you might have picked him as a schoolboy who'd wandered over to Kooyong from the adjacent Scotch College. Television was still three years away in Australia, and Ken had little experience of being quizzed in front of cameras and microphones. He seemed much more vulnerable than his so-called Sydney 'twin'

above: Ken Rosewall (top) serving a customer in his father's grocery shop in 1956; Rod 'the Rocket' Laver (bottom right); Alan Trengove looking every inch the part as a reporter (below left).

I was completely enthralled, knowing I'd found the right sport – and the right time to report on it.

Lew Hoad, another 18-year-old and a veritable fair-haired Adonis, though sometimes moody and unpredictable.

Hoad this time lost in the second round, while Rosewall made the final, where he took the first nine games against Rose, prompting the older man, who knew a bit about gamesmanship, to moan: 'Aw, fair go, Ken. Give me a couple of games!' Rosewall continued to thrash him, however, and today remains both the youngest and (since 1972) the oldest winner of the Australian title. A man for all seasons if ever there was one.

Yet another teenage marvel illuminated Kooyong in 1953: the relentless American baseliner Maureen Connolly won the women's title and went on to complete the Grand Slam, the first woman to do so. I was completely enthralled, knowing I'd found the right sport – and the right time to report on it.

Hoad and Rosewall gave Australia its first tennis boom. They were admired everywhere; and in their own country they were loved. Rosewall, a grocer's son, raised to value the pennies and ha'pennies in his parents' business, stirred many a woman's maternal instinct because of his modest build and angelic features.

His female fans need not have worried about his supposed fragility. While he failed a 'physical' that ruled him out of national service, he had the muscled legs of a sprinter, the ruthlessness of a born competitor, and an innate sense of tactics. His effortless, slightly undercut backhand ranks as one of the most beautiful tennis strokes of all time.

Hoad's style was more explosive. With a solid physique and wrists of steel, he could bury almost any opponent under a devastating barrage. He tended to be careless, however, and sometimes went easy on lesser players.

In most sports, keen rivalries stir enthusiasm and enhance the traditions of a tournament. Down the years, I witnessed gripping contests between Borg and McEnroe; Lendl and Wilander; Federer and Nadal; Evert and Navratilova. But Hoad and Rosewall weren't only rivals; they were also at times doubles partners and close Davis Cup allies. Whatever their role, a large part of their lustre rubbed off on the Australian Nationals.

Reporting on major tennis events in the early '50s was far more casual than it is today. Then, at the end of a day's play at Kooyong, I'd sink a leisurely beer or two in the clubhouse before catching a tram or cadging a lift back to the Argus office. If time did run short, I dictated my story over a public phone to a typist in the office. There was no such thing as a 'mobile phone'.

In that period the championships rotated between Kooyong, White City (Sydney), Memorial Drive (Adelaide), and Milton (Brisbane). If the tournament was held outside Victoria, you normally sent your stories by telegram if time ran short; and if a temporary communications office wasn't set up at the tennis ground, you checked with the local GPO to find out at what time of night the building would be closed, and made sure you lodged your copy before the deadline.

Some facilities were gruesomely primitive. Usually, the press box at a tennis stadium was not used from one summer to the next, and a close inspection could reveal a nasty shock. At White City one year a decomposed corpse was discovered high up in the stands at the back of the dark and dirty press section – not a bored tennis fan, but a homeless person, perhaps, who'd been seeking winter shelter.

Occasionally, at these venues, there was only one expeditious way to send 'running' copy: you'd stuff it into an empty Coca Cola bottle, which you'd dangle, by means of a piece of string, down the rear of the stands until, at ground level, it was snatched by a messenger boy who ran with it to the cable office.

This was a far cry from today's streamlined system of transmitting copy. Now, journalists are housed in a spacious media workroom, with television screens on every desk providing video of all matches in progress, plus statistics and interviews. Thus, it is possible to cover a tournament without ever leaving the media room, and some scribes never go near a tennis court for the entire two weeks of a Grand Slam.

Most of these journalists are quick workers and so skilled in the use of computers that they're able to send a 1000-word epic through the ether within seconds of a match's end. At its destination, a sub-editor slots the story into the space allocated for it in next day's paper. The process is that of a Ferrari compared

to a horse-drawn cart. But those less adept beware – hit the wrong key and you can lose 1000 words even quicker than you can transmit them.

The lack of television until 1956 was a boon to print journalists, since they were able to write stories knowing that few of their readers had actually seen what happened. The talented descriptive writer still had a role to play, and not until the introduction of TV were shot-by-shot sports reports made redundant.

Today, tennis writers are more intent on obtaining the players' quotes as a way of giving the public something fresh to read. In the old days, however, players did not always wish to be interviewed after, say, a bad loss or a tantrum. These days they have no choice: interviews are mandatory, and a player may be heavily fined for avoiding a press conference. Communication, in this age of intense marketing, is integral to the promotion of the game.

Tennis has changed in other ways. No longer are tennis racquets made of wood. Nor any longer are tennis balls white. Once, the Australian championships were played over five advantage sets, and, because tiebreaks had not yet been introduced, a match might stretch to more than 70 games. Conversely, it is because of the tiebreak that a player can lose a match without once dropping serve.

In men's tennis, a 10-minute interval was usually granted if the score stood at two sets to one. Some spectators who rushed to the bar never saw another shot in the match, such was the attraction of refreshment on a hot January day.

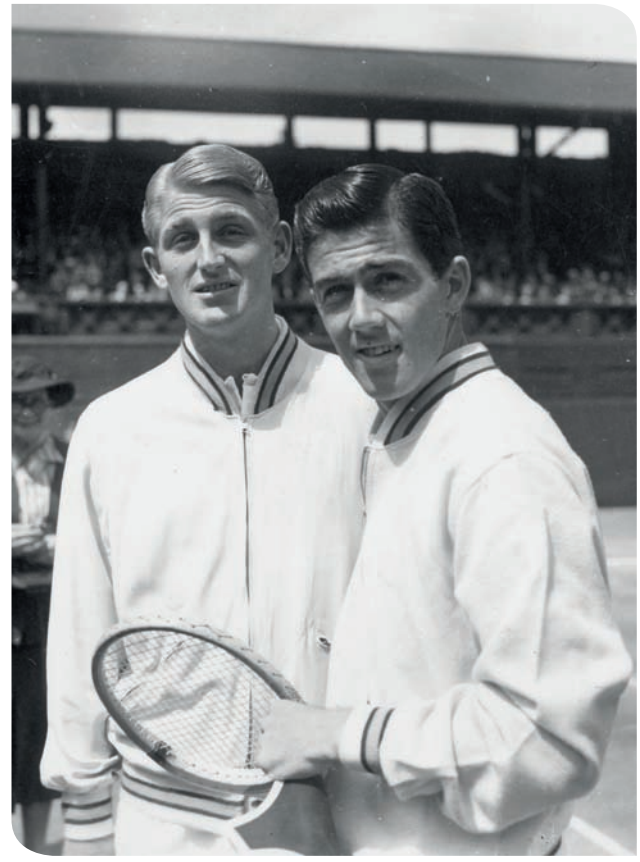
Players were forbidden to sit down at a change of ends, as they do now. Nor could they use any type of umbrella to protect themselves from the blazing sun. Some stood, quaffing copious amounts of water, with a wet towel draped over their head, and clinging to any shade caste by the umpire, who sat above them in an elevated umpire's chair. It would have all been good training for the Kokoda Trail.

I recall being surprised at how zealous some officials were in enforcing these tough conditions. One famous martinet was the Queensland referee Edgar Stumbles. In 1956 he made life difficult for two American players, Herb Flam and Gil Shea, who'd come to Brisbane in quest of the Australian title. Stumbles bluntly rejected Flam's repeated requests for the use of a chair at changeovers. Finally, Flam sent a boy on a search for a chair, and the lad returned with one from the kitchen. The match descended into farce as Stumbles and Flam almost came to blows in a struggle for possession of the chair. Finally, Flam, in desperation, turned an icebox into a seat and sat down in temporary relief.

Shea's clash with Stumbles was also good fun. Players were usually permitted to wear spike shoes on wet grass courts, but Stumbles told Shea he could not wear spikes on this occasion as they would cut up the turf too much. Shea protested to no avail, and eventually played in bare feet, continually slipping over, as in a slapstick movie. Both Americans were eliminated early and were so traumatised they never returned.

More serious was the occasion on which Mervyn Rose suspected that the lines on centre court were incorrectly marked for a doubles match; at one end he simply could not land a service in play. I was one of a trio of tennis writers who were rebuffed by indignant officials when we sought confirmation of Rose's allegation. Later, as it grew dark, I snaffled a 12-inch ruler from the secretary's office, and used it to check Rose's claim. Sure enough, the service area at one end was 18 inches short – an embarrassing error in a Grand Slam tournament. I delivered to my newspaper the result of this dubious venture in investigative journalism, and it made the front page.

I must admit, though, I suffered a twinge of guilt. In that era, practically all tennis officials contributed their services on an honorary basis. You might find a bank manager chauffeuring



this page: Australians Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall before their US Open 1956 final, won by Rosewall.

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players to their hotel; a railway clerk conducting a tournament draw; or a librarian allocating practice courts. At Kooyong, Jim Shepherd, a businessman with a background as a Mr Fix-it, would invariably be on hand when pumps or other equipment broke down. Some of the tournament staff took annual leave from their regular jobs because they loved tennis and wanted to help the tournament be a success. It seemed mean to criticise well-meaning, though inexperienced, enthusiasts for their inevitable stuff-ups.

Today, almost all Australian Open staff receive at least a token amount for their efforts, and the level of professionalism is high.

Among the problems that referees and umpires had to adjudicate 50 years ago were cases of players cramping, a frequent occurrence in Australia's hot and steamy summer. Any player so afflicted could not receive medical treatment on court unless he or she defaulted. Some defied their pain and would writhe helplessly until obliged to give up. It was at Brisbane, during an interval in the men's final, that I walked into the clubhouse and found Rosewall battling cramp under a cold shower. Ken's jaw, in particular, was painfully locked. He could not speak, yet recovered sufficiently to return to the court and lose in four draining sets to Hoad – Lew's solitary Australian singles crown.

That was the year Lew was expected to complete the Grand Slam. He had won the Australian title, and had added the French and Wimbledon titles to it before going to New York as a warm favourite to win the US title too. He, rather than Rod Laver, would then have been the second man, after Don Budge, to win all four majors in a calendar year. From a cab window in Manhattan, Lew saw a newspaper poster acclaiming him as the likely 'Grand Slammer from Down Under'.

'I didn't have a clue what they were on about,' he told me years later. He failed to live up to public expectations and lost the final to Rosewall before adjourning philosophically to the clubhouse bar. The story seems incredible unless you understand that the Grand Slam concept did not receive much publicity at that time, and that Lew was a casual fellow, more interested in catching up on Snoopy than in reading about tennis.

In the '50s, tournament draws in both the men's and women's singles were limited to 32 players. Even then, several first-round byes were needed to pad out the program since there simply weren't enough good players in Australia – or adequate dressing-room facilities – to make a much larger competition practicable. Only a handful of foreigners played in the men's event, while the women's field was often devoid of foreign entries altogether. Today, the field for the Open comprises 128 players in both draws; and qualifying competitions are necessary as well.

At Kooyong, to make the early stages of the tournament more entertaining, the committee devised what it called a 'Pragmatic Draw'. Instead of having byes in the first round, the committee 'placed' a more-than-useful Melbourne club player alongside the name of an Australian or foreign drawcard, trusting the latter would pass into the second round, though only after a good match. The practice would have shocked purists had they been aware of it, but it served its purpose and you could mostly rely on seeing an interesting match in the early rounds. I came to know some of these tennis battlers rather well because we were fellow-members of Kooyong, and would occasionally meet in the bar. For me, it provided a more intimate perspective to the Nationals.

Two rank outsiders were Brian Tobin and Don Tregonning. In 1953, they met in the first round, and were engaged in a grim struggle on one of the field courts when, at about six o'clock, the umpire stepped down from his chair and announced that he had to go home to tea. "But you can't go now," said the players. "We need you."

The umpire was adamant. "I have to go," he repeated. "My wife is expecting me." He thereupon departed, as did a couple of ball boys. After a lengthy break, the match resumed, with a makeshift umpire and Tobin's girlfriend (later his wife) Carmen Borelli foxing the balls.

The *Argus* put my light-hearted story on the front page, and I received a complimentary note from the editor and a raise. Tobin subsequently made the Australian top 10. Years later he became, first, the president of Tennis Australia and later the president of the International Tennis Federation (ITF).

The only international correspondent that I recall from those days is the American Will Grimsley of Associated Press. Will would arrive from New York for a Davis Cup Challenge Round between Australia and America, but would never stay for the Australian titles that followed immediately afterwards. That indifference summed up how the world then rated them.

Who would have thought that by 2010 the Open would achieve record aggregate crowds of more than 650,000? That the media contingent alone would number 1700? And that the winner's pay cheque would total $2,100,100?

I attended many historic matches over the years. At the 1960 Nationals at Brisbane, for instance, I watched a 21-year-old redhead win his first Grand Slam crown in withering heat after saving a match point against Neale Fraser. His name: Rodney George ('The Rocket') Laver, a player never more dangerous than when he had his back to the wall.

At the same championships, a gawky 17-year-old named Margaret Smith (later, Margaret Court) defeated the reigning Wimbledon champion, Maria Bueno of Brazil, on her way to capturing the first of her incredible 11 Australian singles titles. Laver received a lovely silver tea service for his victory; Margaret merely an umbrella for hers. Women have long been disadvantaged in Australian sport.

Amid the splendour of the modern tournament, it is easy to forget how desperately the championships struggled for existence in the years up to 1972, when a private company, Tennis Camp of Australia (TCA) comprising John Brown, Jim and Doug Reid, and Frank Sedgman, took over promotion of the Open; their main stipulation was that the tournament must be permanently based thereafter in sport-mad Melbourne. There had been many years when the LTAA (now Tennis Australia) lost money on the championships. Most of the world's leading players, including the top Australians, were contracted to foreign companies that were cool to the Australian cause and reluctant to let their players play here. Crowds were poor; sponsors often unobtainable.

Gradually, the situation eased. In the '70s and '80s, more top Aussies, including Mal Anderson, Ken Rosewall and John Newcombe, returned to Kooyong. The women's event often featured superstars such as Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova and Hana Mandlikova.

Informality became a byword of the tournament, with Kooyong fans more than happy to sit in the sun all day. If all seats were occupied – say for the famous Connors v Newcombe showdown in 1975, or for yet another classic battle between Evert and Navratilova – a few hundred additional spectators were allowed to sprawl on the grassy surrounds of centre court. One can't imagine that ever happening at Wimbledon.

On the warmest days, some male patrons would discard their shirts – another no-no at the All England Club. Eskies were much in evidence; and though there was no decent restaurant on the premises – just a pie stall – people took along sandwiches, white wine or a few cans of Fosters, and had a picnic in the stands.

above: Alan Trengove at work in the press seats at Flinders Park flanked by fellow tennis writers Bruce Matthews (left) and the late Don Lawrence.

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Today, there are numerous eateries at Melbourne Park, but the tournament still caters for the Aussie love of informality, with room for picnics in The Garden Square, and for barbecues in more remote corners.

Another aspect of Australian informality is the friendliness shown to visiting players. Sir Norman Brookes, the then president of Tennis Australia, and his wife Dame Mabel, were generous hosts, and, with no play on Sundays (because of the Sunday Observance laws), they would invite the entire cast of players, umpires and officials to their graceful seaside home at Mount Eliza for a garden party that included social tennis.

Nowadays, with 'blockbuster' matches scheduled for almost every night, there is little time for socialising. If you need to be at Melbourne Park at 11 am, and are still on duty in the early hours of the following day, there's not much energy left for making whoopee.

The few superstars lured to the tournament – such as Arthur Ashe, Jimmy Connors, Vitas Gerulaitis, and Guillermo Vilas – were treated like lords, possibly in the hope that they would return, but also because they'd forged a good relationship with tournament directors John Brown and Colin Stubs. When Ivan Lendl could not get laundry done at his city hotel, Stubs took home Ivan's sweaty shirts, socks and shorts, and his wife put them through her washer. Ask one of the brigadiers at Wimbledon to do that!

On another visit Down Under, when Lendl was troubled by a kidney complaint, officials provided him with his own conveniently located toilet, shielded from the public gaze by discreet hessian sacking. They called it "Lendl's Loo".

Meanwhile, year after year, Kooyong's resident goat was tethered to an embankment overlooking the "outside" courts and watched proceedings with an aficionado's eye. The goat's job was to trim the grass on the bank while feasting itself, but some bewildered overseas players, not accustomed to the vagaries of grass-court bounces, probably wondered if the curator might also have used its services on the field of play.

Australians are justifiably proud of the Open's rapid growth. Wimbledon, of course, remains the game's unofficial Mecca, with an orderly and conservative image. While its crowds can be both sedate and sentimental, its adherence to tradition has not prevented it from following Melbourne Park's example of installing a retractable roof over centre court.

Roland Garros, with its picturesque chestnut trees and imaginative innovations, has yet something of the stark bullring about it, with players facing a punishing test of nerve, skill and stamina on the turgid red clay. And Flushing Meadows, with its noise, its smells and myriad sights, its raucous crowds and non-stop activity – almost around the clock – is the game's fairground.

The Australian Open is none of these things. It has a distinct character of its own, partly moulded by its happy informality, the goodwill of the season, the tennis knowledge of local fans; and the tradition provided by former Aussie greats whose sculpted busts are proudly displayed. The tournament is indeed one of our national treasures.

In 1988 a new era of the Australian Open began with the construction of a national tennis centre at Melbourne Park (originally, Flinders Park), on the fringe of the central business district. It included a comfortable "state-of-the-art" stadium, which had a retractable roof.

There was only one regret: hard courts replaced grass as the national court surface, thus ending more than a century of tradition.

Initially, I shared the view then held by Paul McNamee (later to be the tournament director), John Fitzgerald and others that it was a bad decision. We believed hard courts would drastically change the character of the tournament – and perhaps the character of Australian tennis. Such courts might become a factor in eventually weakening our players' ability to play attractive, high-quality, all-court tennis.

But, whatever the fears, Tennis Australia had no option, as the new centre could not have been built without strong financial

support from the Victorian government. The government wanted a multi-purpose facility particularly suited to pop concerts and the like. Grass simply wouldn't work.

As it transpired, the loss of grass was generally forgotten in the excitement of so many foreign players and international tennis writers descending on Melbourne Park for the first tournament held there in January 1988. Everyone lavished praise on the new citadel, even though the ditching of grass probably cost us a golden opportunity to crown an Australian-born champion.

Pat Cash was one of only a handful of outstanding grass-court players in the men's field. He had won Wimbledon six months earlier, beating Sweden's Mats Wilander in a quarter-final, and Czech Ivan Lendl in the final. Now, the same two baseliners blocked his path at Melbourne Park. He again beat Lendl, but Wilander, so smart at mixing up his game on a slower surface, thwarted him in a gripping final, 6-3, 6-7, 3-6, 6-1, 8-6.

Cash would have been the first Australian winner of the men's singles since Mark Edmondson in 1976. He never made the final again, and Edmondson remains to this day the last Australian to hoist the coveted Norman Brookes trophy above his head.

There were no grumbles: the much admired Swedes – Wilander, Stefan Edberg, Anders Jarryd and others – were regarded as 'honorary' Aussies. There was more controversy in the women's singles between Steffi Graf and Chris Evert when a heavy shower interrupted play. Evert, always a tough competitor, was making a brave recovery from a slow start. But closure of the roof confused her and she lost to the young German 6–1, 7–6.

I wrote a piece for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in which I questioned her preparation. She'd arrived rather late, whereas Graf had come 10 days before the commencement and had spent time practising on centre court in different conditions. Chris, in a letter to me, resented my 'slur' on her professionalism and reckoned she'd been treated unfairly.

Although she described Melbourne Park as 'the best facility in the world, bar none', she added: 'To play 13 days in bright sunlight and then to play the Grand Finale indoors in dark conditions is a bit unfair, especially when I had no matches at night under the lights previously.

'You people,' she continued, 'are going to have a major problem with the players in future if you (a) don't allow practice indoors on the stadium court, and (b) make the top players play one indoor night match before the later rounds…'

It was her last appearance Down Under.

Chris's criticism was unfounded. The retractable roofs – on Rod Laver Arena, Hisense Arena, and (soon) Margaret Court Arena – are wonderful assets and have been used judiciously. The Open is still, fundamentally, an outoor tournament, subject to certain rules. But it is also mass entertainment, and sensible compromises

are sometimes needed to achieve the best result, especially in a country as challenged by the elements as Australia.

The various roofs have contributed significantly to the 'Blockbuster' concept over the last two decades. Fans know that, rain, hail or shine, there'll be a good chance of witnessing, at one of the show courts or at home on television, a tennis classic – possibly one to match Agassi v Rafter in 2001, Roddick v El Aynaoui in 2003, Hewitt v Baghdatis in 2008, and Nadal v Verdasco in 2009.

A seat at Melbourne Park offers a vastly different experience than one at Kooyong. But if it's a balmy summer Saturday night and you can watch two of the leading contenders for a Grand Slam crown – go for it. I might even break a veteran sports writer's golden rule and buy a seat myself!

above: Pat Rafter congratulates winner Andre Agassi after their blockbuster semi-final at Melbourne Park in 2001.