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Getting Into Wimbledon

By Steve Smith

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Wimbledon. It's a word that stands for tennis at its best.

Although it is first of all the name of a London suburb, for millions of tennis fans around the world it is shorthand for sportsmanship, athletic prowess, and celebrity stardom. For the half-a-million or so people who manage to see at least some of the annual championship games in person, it also means a huge social event.

One of the great things about the championship tennis tournament played every summer at Wimbledon is that it's one of the few major sporting events for which the average fan (i.e, neither rich nor well-connected) stands a decent chance of gaining entry.

Interestingly, the Wimbledon games ultimately owe their existence not to tennis but to another, more sedate, game that was all the rage among the Victorians: croquet. You see, the private club that sponsors the world's foremost tennis championship was founded originally as The All England Croquet Club.

Founded in 1868, the club did not hold its first tennis championships until 1877. Those games were witnessed by a few hundred spectators in what is described as a "garden party atmosphere."

For a long time now the club's name has been The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, and the Wimbledon championships are attended by more than 500,000 people as well as carried to millions around the world through mass media and the Internet.

The tournament starts six weeks before the first Monday in August and runs for approximately two weeks. Players from more than 60 countries regularly compete.

If you're planning to be in London during the two June or July weeks when the tournament is being played, getting in to see at least a match or two would be a marvelous experience for any tennis fan. So how can you score a ticket to this greatest of all tennis events?

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If you definitely want to attend the next year's Wimbledon, you should enter the public ballot (or lottery) that is held each January for some of the Centre Court and No. 1 Court seats. You will need some luck to pick up a ticket this way, but it's worth a try. All it takes is obtaining the official application form and returning it by the deadline (the exact procedures and addresses are detailed on the Tops 4 Tennis Web site at

www.tops4tennis.com/articles/wimbledon.html

).

If you are successful in the drawing for tickets, you will be notified about four months before the beginning of the tournament and asked to send payment at that time.

Another way to get into the tournament is to purchase a travel package from one of the many companies specializing in tennis tours. Most of these Wimbledon packages will include transportation,

lodging and perhaps some local side tours in addition to the tickets themselves. This is a convenient way to go to the tournament if you like the all-in-one approach to buying travel. If you're more of an independent traveler, it might not suit you as well.

You can find Wimbledon travel operators on the Web by searching on "Wimbledon tournament travel" or "Wimbledon travel package."

There are also a number of ticket brokers online, some of whom specialize in sporting events such as Wimbledon. They buy tickets from willing sellers and re-sell them to willing buyers, or alternatively they simply bring the sellers and buyers together to make their own deal. The brokers make their money through the fees or commissions they charge for this service.

Finally, you can also stand in line for tickets during the tournament itself.

Several thousand same-day tickets are put on public sale while the games are going on. You'll have to be present and willing to stand on line a long time to get one of these. In the end you might still miss out, but if you're in the area anyway and have patience, you should show up early and have a go at it.

If you're an avid tennis player or fan or both, Wimbledon is one event you should see in person at least once in your life.

See you courtside?

Steve Smith is a writer living near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His Web site, Tops 4 Tennis, includes an expanded version of this article at www.tops4tennis.com/articles/wimbledon.

Andre Agassi Says Adieu

By Jonathon Hardcastle

At the start of the 2006 Wimbledon Championships last June, tennis great Andre Agassi announced that he was retiring from professional tennis. The curtain was about to come down on one of the most successful and popular careers the sport had ever seen, a career that spanned two decades, eight Grand Slam championships and a host of unforgettable moments on the tennis court.

The 36-year-old Agassi said that after Wimbledon, he would play just one more major tournament, the US Open, and then call it quits. The announcement caused shock waves in the world of tennis and almost immediately, tennis players and fans alike started to consider Agassi's place in the pantheon of the sport.

"He'll go down as one of the guys who changed our sport in a lot of ways, not only the way he played the game, but also the way that he conducted himself on and off the court," said 2002 Wimbledon champion and former world number one Lleyton Hewitt. "There are not too many more recognizable people in tennis. The sport probably owes a lot to him."

"His longevity and desire to compete at the highest level have been remarkable. He has brought a huge amount to our sport and will be missed," said Pete Sampras, the seven-time Wimbledon champion whose on-court rivalry with Agassi helped boost tennis' popularity in the 1990s.

"He's a legend," said reigning French Open champion Rafael Nadal

Many forget that he wasn't always held in such high regard. Early in his career, Agassi was known mostly for his image ("Image is Everything," said one of his popular advertising campaigns at the time) rather than the substance in his game. It was a reputation borne from his early days on the professional tour as a kid with the denim shorts, Day-Glo shirts and flowing hair. These days, however, Agassi leaves the tennis scene as a respected elder statesman and with a legacy that is perhaps without precedence.

"I don't think there's one bad thing you can say about the guy," said 2004 Wimbledon champion Maria Sharapova. "I mean, that guy is just a champion. It's amazing to still have someone around that's achieved so much and that's done so much for the sport."

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