

Tennis – one of the greatest spectator sports of all time

A review essay

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The game of tennis emerged in England during the 1870s. Various forms of sport and games with a racket and balls had existed since the Middle Ages, but when the rules of ‘lawn tennis’ regarding the size of the court, the height of the net, the appearance of the rackets and the size and weight of the balls were established by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon just outside London, a new sport had been born. Tennis quickly gained traction; new clubs were formed all over England and the game spread to British colonies around the world. Hotel and resort complexes built their own tennis courts to attract guests with the new popular sport. Early on, tennis became a spectator sport of rank and tournaments were created that attracted large crowds of spectators. In 1877, the first championship was played at Wimbledon and already ten years later it was noted that around 20,000 spectators followed the tournament, and a special women’s competition was opened in 1884. In his book *Tennis: A History from American Amateurs to Global Professionals*, Greg Ruth gives a committed and detailed account of the history of tennis from the late 1800s to well into the 2000s. For the inveterate tennis lover, the book is a goldmine with an abundance of detailed information of individual tennis clubs and some interesting players, coaches, and managers.

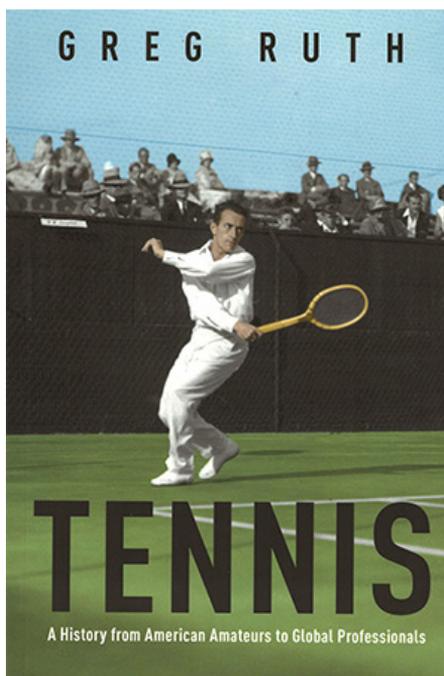
At the heart of Ruth’s rich book is the struggle between amateur tennis with its

major championship competitions worldwide and professional tennis, both for men and women, with showcase games for prize money. In the late 1960s, the tennis world was united and the boundary between amateurs and professionals disappeared. A strong commercial development took off with ever increasing prize money, sponsor commitments and advertising around the sport. In the second half of the 20th century and up to the present day there has been a steadily growing public interest in tennis and an increased mass media focus on individual male and female stars.

JOHNNY WIJK, b. 1955 and professor of history at Stockholm University, defended his dissertation in 1992 on the rationing system on food and the black market during the Second World War entitled *Svarta börsen – samhällslojalitet i kris: Livsmedelsransoneringarna och den illegala handeln i Sverige 1940-1949* [The Black Market – Social Loyalty in Crisis: Food Rationing and Illegal Trade in Sweden 1940-1949]. In 2005 he published *Idrott, krig och nationell gemenskap: Om fältsport, riksmarscher och Gunder Hägg-feber* [Sports, War and National Community: On Field Sports, National Marches and Gunder Hägg-fever] (2005). At present, Wijk focuses on the development of Swedish tennis and golf from the 1950s to today, with a side glance at the new racket sport padel.

Ever since modern tennis – originally called lawn tennis – emerged at the end of the 19th century as a new sport, it has been surrounded by a great audience interest. Early on, the first competitions attracted audiences who wanted to see both male and female players and their skills in handling rackets and balls in exciting and entertaining matches. The aesthetic assets of tennis, the curious scoring system, the individual challenges, and the manifest struggle between two athletes appealed to sports enthusiasts both to want to play themselves and as spectators to admire other skilled players on the court. Through the 150-year history of tennis, there have also been early exhibition games for money, players who were paid to show their skill in various places. In parallel, there was a rapid growth at the end of the 19th century of new clubs with increasing membership, and championship competitions for amateurs began to be played. The battle between tennis as an amateur sport versus tennis as a professional entertainment business runs through the first 100 years of tennis history.

In the first decades of the 21st century, tennis has managed to maintain and even strengthen its position as one of the greatest spectator sports. The major Grand Slam tournaments are played in front of sold-out venues and with multimillion-dollar audiences via televised broadcasts around the world. The Australian Open, for example, most recently played for two weeks in Melbourne in January 2022, featured a series of spectacular matches day after day with global TV broadcasts, with the men’s final almost unprecedented in sporting drama and excitement, a five-hour “gladiatorial fight” between Russian Medvedev and Spaniard Nadal in a match that went



Greg Ruth

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back and forth. Rafael Nadal eventually stood as the winner despite being down 0–2 in sets and at that point was seen as almost certainly a loser. The unlikely turnaround also meant that he had won 21 Grand Slam titles, more than any other man in tennis history, a particularly impressive feat in an ongoing sporting career.

The ability of tennis, like few other sports, to offer attractive entertainment while also showing off individual megastars, modern global celebrities – men as well as women, is the main reason why tennis is also one of the most successful commercial and media sports, with almost astronomic prize money and advertising revenue for the top athletes. In the 2022 Australian Open, the winner brought home the equivalence of 2 million US dollars, and in the other three Grand Slam tournaments – the US Open, French Open and Wimbledon – it is even more than that. In 2021, the US Open and Wimbledon had a total prize pool of c. 40.5 million US dollar, with the winner earning around 2.5 million. A fortune, thus, to win a single tennis competition – admittedly one of the toughest in the world. Another perspective is that a player who has managed to qualify for the main competition is guaranteed USD 30,000 and in the event of a win in the first round it is about USD 60,000. Undeniably a decent annual income from winning a single match in a Grand Slam. Of course, in order to achieve this, to get there, given the fierce competition in top international tennis, it'll take many thousands, if not ten thousand, training hours and other physical build-up and lots of matches over many years before the chance to reach the top of the world can even be glimpsed. A special thing about tennis compared to other sports is that since 2007 it is the same prize money for men and women for victory in the biggest championships. Tennis is one of the few sports in the world where even the top female athletes can make substantial sums of money from their sport, their profession – in itself an interesting fact to analyze. The top ten list each year of sportswomen with the highest income is always dominated by tennis players, about five or six, supplemented by an athlete, a basketball player, or a golfer.

Now, while that was a lot of numbers depicting current prize money for the world elite in tennis, it should none the less be mentioned that the top earners take home even more through endorsements, sponsorships, and not least with their own personal brands for sportswear, shoes, rackets, etc. These economic perspectives are an important aspect in order to properly understand the peculiarity of tennis in sports history in terms of early audience markets and elements of professionalization and commercialization. From the middle of the 20th century, there was also a huge breakthrough for

tennis as a spectator sport on television, which led to a steadily increasing mediatization. Tennis is a clear example of a sport that has succeeded well in the modern market for entertainment, audience interest and idolatry.

This framework for the history of tennis has been the subject of a large number of sports history books over the years, especially from England and the United States, (some previously reviewed on *idrottsforum.org*). In 2021, Greg Ruth published a new, ambitious international tennis history titled *Tennis: A History from American Amateurs to Global Professionals*.

Detailed depictions of the true tennis enthusiast

Greg Ruth presents himself in the book's introduction as a great tennis enthusiast, which is also evident in the book. He started playing at a young age and managed to qualify for a college team in the United States, which is not an easy thing, and later also worked as a tennis coach. The commitment and love of the sport permeates the book. Ruth loves to burrow into the details, he has gone through a great variety of archival material, many biographies and memoirs and, above all, read lots of newspaper articles. The endnotes are unusually extensive, around 50 pages at the end of the book accompanied by 15 pages of references. For the inveterate tennis lover, the book is a goldmine with an abundance of detailed information of individual tennis clubs and some interesting players, coaches, and managers. As the title indicates it is mainly from an American perspective, but in parallel he includes international developments. For the reader with more ordinary interest in sports however, the details can obscure the overall perspective. The main focus of the book is the spectator perspective on tennis, the rise of the great idols and the development of professional competition tennis from the very first matches in the 1870s and throughout the 20th century. I would describe the book as an ambitious popular science book, despite the extensive endnotes. There are no research questions or structural and analytical ambitions. The book simply contains a straight chronologically detailed presentation, which is done in a very ambitious and informative way.

The images are a great asset. There are two sections of just over ten pages each filled with photos of many of the old great players and personalities of both genders, both in action on the tennis courts and from the grounds surrounding the big competitions and clubs. Overall, there are around 60 photos with informative captions, the oldest from the late 19th century up to Chris Evert and Arthur Ashe in the 1970s. For a tennis enthusiast, it's easy

to immerse yourself in almost every photo, such as the "French Musketeers" in the 1920s-30s, the first female superstar Suzanne Lenglen, Fred Perry, Bill Tilden, Don Budge, the movie star Gussie Moran, the famous Pancho Gonzales, Rod Laver, Tony Roche and Bobby Riggs. There is also the entire group of woman players called "Original Nine", each holding up a dollar bill to symbolize the first contract and the start of the first female professional circus in the United States in the 1970s with icon Billie Jean King in the lead. To name but a few. The photo material itself reflects the history of tennis, including the gradually changing tennis fashion, racket development, the courts, and the audiences. You are struck by the thought that there should also be a book just with photos and pictures from the nearly 150 years of tennis as a major spectator and world sport, there ought to be thousands of interesting pictures. Or is there already such a book?

One can distinguish three periods in Ruth's description of tennis history – although Ruth himself does not clearly point it out via the table of contents or the chapter division, which would have been a good service and provided a better overview for the reader. The first period is about the breakthrough of modern tennis from the 1870s, the first clubs and the first competitions, how tennis spread from England and first to the British colonies and then around the world. The second period begins in the mid-1920s when the first more organized pro shows became a reality, and the struggle between amateur tennis with its lofty ideal of pure amateurism and the professional activities where there was money involved really took off. The rivalry between amateurs and professionals grew steadily over the next few decades, dividing the tennis world into two sides, with the amateurs strongly opposing anything that even remotely resembled professionalism.

The third period commenced in 1968 when the best professionals competed against the world's best amateurs. Once the first step was taken, there was no turning back. For years, public opinion had asked to see the world's best players compete in the biggest events, whether they were classified as professionals or amateurs. It was an immediate success. From 1968 tennis abolished the barrier between amateurs and professionals and international tennis developed at a furious pace, commercially as well as in terms of media exposure. Incidentally, tennis's move to repeal amateur regulations had an impact on the development of many other sports and the amateur concept gradually withered away. Even in the Olympic Games, the amateur demands were eventually cancelled – although the old IOC bigwigs held on for a long time and it took a shift in the IOC presidency before the Games in the early 1980s took the first steps towards full commercialism on all levels.

Below are some general impressions from and reflections on Greg Ruth's three periods.

Modern tennis was established in the 1870s and spread around the world

Various forms of racket and ball games have been around since way back in history. Early traces exist from the Middle Ages and in the 18th century regular ballhouses were built where games were played with rackets and a ball over some sort of net. Probably the ball could bounce on the walls as well, which has evoked thoughts about squash but now evokes associations to the new fad padel tennis, or mostly just padel. During the 19th century, tennis-like games were also played outdoors, but the pitches probably had more triangular, or hourglass-like, forms since it was often played on cricket pitches. There are slightly different ideas about when and how the tennis game got its current form. According to Greg Ruth, it was a major Walter Clopton Wingfield who in 1873 constructed a court on grass in Wales that became the start of modern tennis. Wingfield patented his rectangular court and also wrote a rulebook on how the game should be played, launching the concept "lawn tennis" to distinguish the game from other similar and competing racket sports. Wingfield was also involved in designing equipment for the game, selling a special wooden box containing four rackets, a net, two net posts, and two balls. In the box there was also his rule book of the lawn tennis game. In modern terms, then, a whole kit to buy for interested people. The tennis game thus comprised a kind of commercialism from the very beginning.

The newspapers drew attention to Wingfield's idea, word spread, and he sold over a thousand such tennis packages already the first year. The product and the game quickly spread to France and further across Europe as well as to the British colonies. In the first years, a market for developed rackets and balls emerged. For example, the firm Slazenger produced a special "Colonial ball" that would better withstand the warm climate of India, Australia, Africa, and South America. The United States was no longer part of the British Empire, but trade and cultural offerings meant close contacts. As early as 1874, a Mary Ewing Outerbridge is said to have travelled from the Bermudas to the United States with said tennis packages in her luggage and introduced the game to her brother, who was the director of a Cricket and Baseball Club, and who allowed a remote part of the lawns to the new

activity lawn tennis. In the coming years, many tennis kits were imported from England, the game increased in popularity among the middle classes and tennis clubs began to form.

In England, lawn tennis spread rapidly and gained a strong foothold. Clubs were formed in many places and in the London suburb of Wimbledon, the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club gained a dominant position. There, the rules were fixed in detail and all the exact measurements were determined about the size of the court, the height of the net and the size and weight of the balls. The rules were communicated and soon there was a standardization that meant that tennis was played under the same rules all over the world. Lawn tennis courts were built at hotels in seaside resorts for recreation and entertainment for guests. So far, it was mainly the upper echelons of society that took on the new sport.

In 1877 the first tennis championship at Wimbledon was held, with 22 participants with diverse of professionals, including a couple of military officers, an architect, a mayor, and two priests. As early as at the third Wimbledon championship in 1879, tennis was well established in much of England and the final that year was watched by 1,300 spectators. Ten years later, in the late 1880s, around 20,000 spectators were admitted during a Wimbledon tournament. Tennis established itself early on as a spectator sport of rank.

In 1881, a national tennis federation was formed, the United States National Lawn Tennis Association with 34 affiliated clubs from the start. Ten years later, more than 100 clubs were involved. In the very first rules of the federation it was declared that only pure amateurs were allowed as members and to participate in the federation's competitions. Professionals – such as talented players instructing others for payment at the clubs – were not accepted. This is where the battle between amateurs and professionals began. In the United States, national championships were held, but from 1885 international players were also allowed to participate. Two years later, businessman and competitive player Dwight Davis sponsored some of England's best players' journey over to the United States to participate in the U.S. Championships – an early precursor to today's U.S. Open.

This Dwight Davis was to have a historical role in tennis when in 1900 he donated a large silver trophy as a prize for an "International Challenge Cup" competition, a team match first only between the United States and England that later changed its name to Davis Cup, and eventually developed into a highly acclaimed competition between nations in tennis all over the world throughout the 20th century and some way into the 2000s. Today, however, the competition has lost its status as the world elite players have started to

participate more sporadically, and the competition is now being played with a new concept and the previous great attention around Davis Cup has decreased significantly.

One thing about tennis is that women were in competition from the very beginning. In 1879 in Dublin, the first tennis tournament for women was announced, and a few years later in 1884 it was time for Wimbledon to open its tournament for women. The first winner was Maud Watson, who had competed in croquet before but has turned to tennis. In most tennis history books, and there are many, a young Frenchwoman born at the turn of the 20th century usually gets a lot of attention. So too in Greg Ruth's book. It's about Suzanne Lenglen – a pioneer in tennis who changed the perception of the women's game and their clothes on court. She was also one of the first to seriously developed professional tennis. She grew up on the French Riviera and from a young age she was systematically trained by her father. She developed a high precision in her strokes and she trained speed and soft mobility. Immediately after the First World War when she was 20 years old, she made her debut at Wimbledon where she reached the final.

Lenglen's way of playing unusually varied tennis, with precision, smooth cat-like movement patterns on the court, and her way of dressing in new, shorter and loose-fitting dresses to her knees – instead of a dress going right down to the ankles, as was customary – with open neck and short sleeves, all this combined with her famous outgoing personality quickly made her a huge favorite. The 1919 women's final was sold out with 8,000 spectators and the crowd queued for hours outside the arena in the hope of getting a seat. The opponent was the seasoned English-woman Dorothea Chambers, who had won the competition seven times before. After a hard and even match, Lenglen won in the deciding set, and then won Wimbledon another five years in a row. She was described as moving very gracefully, almost as if she was dancing forward in the game. Lenglen became the first female tennis celebrity, constantly appearing in the papers for her game, her clothes and her relatively licentious private life among the celebrity elite on the Riviera.

Among the male players, the American William "Big Bill" Tilden was one of the most prominent profiles of the 1920s. In 1920 he became the first American to win Wimbledon, and subsequently won several major titles in England and the US, and he led the United States to victories in the Davis Cup in the following years. Towards the end of the 1920s, Tilden became embroiled in a conflict over his amateur status that later led to a prominent involvement in professional tennis.

Pro tennis with shows challenges amateur tennis from the 1920s

After many years as champion among the women, Suzanne Lenglen left amateur tennis and in 1926 conducted a long tour around the United States, playing exhibition matches for very large amounts of money. Her status and fame as a player meant that it was well-stocked stands that paid for tickets to see her personal graceful play, the style of dress and the famous and exciting personality. It was a Hollywood promoter who had realized the potential of going around showing off elegant tennis by interesting players like Lenglen, and the newspapers caught on with articles and photos that in turn attracted spectators. It was a kind of tennis circus, which also became the designation for this type of activity.

Thus, it was a woman who showed that there was a commercial market with the opportunity to make big money by going around playing exhibition tennis. This prompted several promoters in the U.S. to persuade the best male players to do the same. Big Bill Tilden was one of the best players in the world and number one in the United States during the 1920s. However, there was discussion about him when he was hired as a writer in two major newspapers, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *New York World*, where he wrote popular chronicles about his opinions and thoughts on both his own and others' matches. He was also captain of the U.S. Davis Cup team. However, the amateur ideal of the American tennis federation was so strong that Tilden's job as a writer about his own matches, which he was of course paid for, was considered as professionalism, and he received several warnings about this and was urged to stop writing his chronicles. In 1928, he was even banned from participating in the major amateur competitions and the U.S. national team. However, the suspension provoked an internal debate in which it was considered negative for the country and for tennis that the best player was not allowed to participate in matches due to a dubious amateur interpretation. The criticism was so strong that the federation backed down and the following year the suspension was lifted, and Tilden was allowed to play again. Part of the story is also the fact that the year before Tilden's suspension, the players who worked as tennis instructors at the major clubs in the United States, and thus were pro-class, had formed their own federation, *the Professional Lawn Tennis Association*, in 1927, and thus the fight between amateurism and the professionals had started in dead earnest.

Big Bill Tilden was lured to professional tennis in 1930 and first became the leading player – and later also the leader – for the greatest professional

tennis circus in the United States. Several of the best players in the world joined, including Englishman Fred Perry and Donald Budge, who became the first male player to win a Grand Slam, the four biggest amateur tournaments in the same year, in 1938. Bobby Riggs won Wimbledon in 1939 and joined professional tennis immediately after that and later became a leading manager for many years. Amateur tennis, however, opposed professional activity in every way. Pro shows were not allowed at the clubs, they had to rent other venues instead, and established tennis referees were could not umpire at the professional galas lest they be banned from judging in the regular competitions. There was a cold war between the amateur world and professional tennis.

Jack Kramer won both Wimbledon and the U.S. Championships in 1946-47 and decided immediately afterwards to start playing professional tennis. He became the foremost leader of a professional league that throughout the 1950s and 1960s steadily expanded and seriously threatened to water down the amateur world. Kramer managed to attract the best new players in the world, those who won the major competitions, with the promise of big revenue on exhibition games. Kramer had in his stable the most famous players of the time such as Pancho Gonzales, Frank Sedgman, Pancho Segura, Tony Trabert, Ken Rosewall and others. The pro tour was set up so that they went around for two or three months straight and played in new places almost daily. It is said that during the tour periods in the US they played in the evenings in a city and then rushed off to the train station and took night trains to the next city, to play in the evening and then away again. A slightly stressful existence, but the rewards were bountiful and the game itself probably more playful and relaxed compared to the major championships. The professionals also made tours in Europe, and Sweden received visits several times in the 1950s. A critical debate erupted in the Swedish sports media about the value of paying expensive admission tickets to watch well-heeled athletes play around on the courts in uninteresting matches.

Greg Ruth's book also includes an interesting section about how Jack Kramer's professional circus early on realized television's great potential for the sports world. Tennis is a "camera-friendly" sport and was one of the sports that were attractive to show for start-up broadcasters. Both in Australia and in the US, professional tennis was broadcast on television in the early 1960s in short intense matches. Jack Kramer signed several contracts with various companies and tennis became a common sport on television already in its infancy. Television was generally very important for the commercial development of tennis in the coming decades. Today tennis is one of the

major TV sports across the world, which is one of the main explanations for the large revenues in the sport. The leading players become “celebrities” and the entire industry, with clothes and shoes, rackets and balls, around the game of tennis contributes to the commercial development.

Amateur regulations is abolished and professionals allowed into major competitions from 1968

During the 1960s, the demands for integrating amateur and professional tennis grew stronger. Already at the beginning of the decade, a vote was held within the International Tennis Federation, where but a few individual votes were missing to repeal the strict amateur regulations. However, the discussion continued and in April 1968 a tournament was held in Bournemouth on the English south coast, open to both professionals and amateurs. The tournament was positively received in most camps and the door to open competitions was ajar. A few months later, the French Championships in Paris were played as the first Grand Slam tournament with professionals and amateurs together. Ken Rosewall beat Rod Laver in the final. Shortly afterwards, Wimbledon was also played as an open competition and now Rod Laver beat Tony Roche in the final.

The abolition of amateur rules accelerated the commercial development. Greg Ruth devotes a detailed chapter to a highly acclaimed professional activity in the tennis world in the 1970s. In the United States, Lamar Hunt, a successful sports promoter in football and later also soccer in the United States, formed his own tennis organization, World Championship Tennis (WCT), with the aim of challenging the traditional tennis world with its Grand Slam tournaments. The idea of WCT was to organize a string of tournaments in the United States with the world’s best players, who gained points by how many games they won over the entire season. At the end of the season, a WCT playoff in Dallas was organized with the top eight in two groups where everyone met everyone, followed by semi-finals and a grand final. Thanks to successful TV deals, the WCT playoff was able to offer prize money in a whole new range for the players, amounting to multimillion-dollar sums, which the traditional tennis world has not yet come close to. Unsurprisingly, the world’s top performers also competed in the WCT, which was played indoors in the autumns. The traditional Grand Slam tournaments were played at other times of the year.

WCT was successful throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s with the world's top players competing. Incidentally, in the late 1970s Björn Borg played WCT a number of times and there were critical comments in the Swedish press when he on some occasions chose to forgo Davis Cup games for Sweden, prioritizing preparations for the prosperous WCT events. The press was not gracious in its sharp criticism of Björn Borg's attitude, and he was in conflict with the press for several years. There were also constant conflicts around the WCT, partly with the rest of international tennis, partly with different competing promoters and agents as well as with the players' own organization Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP). The antagonism led to legal disputes over rights and agreements in the 1980s, the WCT lost its attractiveness step by step and the ATP was to play a more active role in how international tennis should and would be organized.

Once the amateur regulations were repealed, even the best female players wanted to be part of the professional development, which Ruth devotes a chapter to. Previously, individual women had participated in professional contexts, including Jack Kramer's professional stable, but the women had had to play for significantly lower sums compared to men. When open prize money was allowed after 1968, a couple of competitions were arranged for women but still with prize money that was only a fraction of the men's. In 1970, therefore, a group of the best women players, headed by Billie Jean King, took the initiative to start their own professional tournaments and competitions. They managed to attract sponsors, the largest being the tobacco brand Philip Morris who wanted to launch a special cigarette designed for women, Virginia Slims. And so the newly formed female tennis organization was named "Virginia Slims". The first competition took place in Houston in September 1970 with eight participants competing for low prize money. In the beginning, the players had to do everything themselves by handing out bills and putting up posters advertising upcoming events and managing all contacts with the media. But the women's competitions attracted audiences and gradually attention grew. Already the following year, 14 Virginia Slims competitions were played around the United States with steadily growing prize money. In Philadelphia in 1973, they raised \$50,000 in total prize money in a single tournament. The women's professional league had shown that they could stand on their own two feet, there were enough audiences and sponsors for the business to break even.

The success of women's tennis gave rise to a smear campaign in the US by some of the leading male players, led by former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs. He provocatively argued that women were playing too poor

tennis and didn't deserve to be paid; they would be better off back home in the kitchen. Bobby Riggs, by that time a veteran, challenged the best female players to demonstrate their low playing capacity. These matches in 1973 were hugely publicized in the US and were played in front of large crowds in large arenas and broadcast live on television to huge audiences. It became a massive media event and was also linked to the general fight for women's equal rights. Bobby Riggs won the first match against Australian Margaret Court but in a second match against Billie Jean King – preceded by enormous attention, betting, and agitation between the sexes – King won, defending the status of female tennis. Both players made large sums of money and the event has been much debated into our time, as witnessed by the 2017 feature film *Battle of the Sexes* about the incident. Today Billie Jean King is an icon in the United States, not only for her illustrious tennis career but also as the foreground figure for the struggle for women's rights in general in society.

Within a few decades, female professional tennis had established itself throughout the world as a successful audience sport with prize money that turned the very top players into multi-millionaires. Women's professional tennis developed into one of the top sports in terms of opportunities for female athletes to receive substantial compensation for many years of training, competition and sacrifice to reach the world elite level.

Greg Ruth's book *A History from American Amateurs to Global Professionals* is, as previously emphasized, a book primarily for the genuine tennis enthusiasts. It contains 250 densely written detailed pages from the history of tennis, with in-depth information in selected parts, especially about the tension between amateurs and professionals. However, what is gained in in-depth interesting details is lost in a paucity of more comprehensive explanations and reasoning – which I don't think was the purpose of the book anyway.

(Translated by Kjell Eriksson)