Tennis terms

ALEXANDER TULLOCH

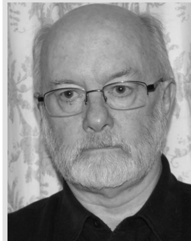
Favourite etymologies from the world of tennis.

AT THE mere mention of summer most of us think only of one thing: Wimbledon. And at the mere mention of Wimbledon everybody thinks of tennis. A summer without a Wimbledon tennis tournament is just about as unthinkable as fish without chips, Romeo without Juliet or the telly without Coronation Street. For two weeks at the height of summer the nation will be gripped with tennis fever. Matches will be played and replayed on our screens day and night and every volley, fault or service analysed by pundits and experts who convince us they know what they are talking about. But where did this game that spellbinds us for a fortnight come from?

The short answer is that we don't really know. All we can say with any degree of certainty is that modern lawn tennis was developed by a certain Major Walter Wingfield in 1873. But he did not so much invent the game as develop it from a very similar game which we know was played as early as the thirteenth century in France. According to reliable sources, this involved hitting a ball with the palm of the hand over a piece of rope much in the manner of modern volleyball players. The same sources tell us that this game caught on pretty quickly and soon became a favourite pastime of the nobility and royalty. In fact, by the time the game spread to England (Henry VIII is credited with inventing the overhand service) it had become so popular with royalty that the term 'royal tennis' was devised. And this is why we still talk of 'real' tennis where the word 'real' is a corruption of 'royal.'

Not everyone agrees about the origin of the word tennis itself. The game was known originally in France as *jeu de paume* ('palm of the hand game') but this term seems to have been superseded by the habit the players had of shouting '*tenez*' (take that!) as they whacked the ball at their opponent and this interjection gave the game its name. Interestingly, Modern French still has the expression *jouer à la paume* meaning 'to play real tennis' as opposed to lawn tennis.

And there is another fascinating linguistic gem here. The Arabic for the palm of the hand is *raha* and this is the derivation of the word 'racket.' Some people have taken this Arabic connection as an indication that the game might be of near eastern origin rather than French. A more likely explanation, however, is that the Arabic term made its way across



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Moorish Spain and turned up in French originally as *raquette*, a kind of paddle shaped implement for stirring liquids. It is also still the modern French for a snow-shoe.

The vast majority of words associated with the game have come into English from French. Take the scoring terms for instance. 'Love' has nothing to do with possible amorous liaisons, either during or after a match, and is simply a corruption of the French *l'oeuf* literally 'an egg' – i.e. what the zero looked like to early match officials trying to keep score with dip-in quills and ink. And this, incidentally, is the same derivation of the cricketing term 'out for a duck' which is an abbreviated form of 'out for a duck's egg'.

When the umpire calls 'deuce', signifying that one of the players has to score two points in a row to win the game, he is in fact speaking pure French. Originally the full expression was *à deux* 'at two.'

And 'umpire' is another direct borrowing from French, which in turn acquired the expression from Latin. What is interesting about this word is that it is basically a mistake. Strictly speaking, we should not talk about 'an umpire' but about 'a numpire'. In the Middle Ages the English word was 'nompere', based on the French *nomper*, from the Latin *non par,* literally 'not equal'. The reasoning behind this was that the term applied to a third party or odd-man-out, unequal to the others and therefore qualified to arbitrate between them.

Like any sporting contest, the Wimbledon fortnight is about winning. Players and spectators alike have only one thing in mind as the titans clash in valiant effort to defeat their opponents and win that cup at the end. Everyone wants to be the champion.

But the original champions were a very different breed from the clean-cut sportsmen of today. In the first place they were not athletes but warriors and not necessarily the best either. They were just soldiers willing to go out and do battle in the middle of some sodden *campus*, the Latin for field. Secondly, by medieval times they had become defenders of a noble lord or the King himself and would frequently be chosen by their master to fight their battles by proxy. Hence we have the historical expression 'the King's Champion.'

The modern form of the word is derived from the Medieval Latin *campion* but an earlier form of the word was also known in Anglo-Saxon times when the normal term for a fighter was *cempa*. This word actually survives in the Modern German verb *kämpfen* 'to fight' and will be known to historians of the twentieth century from the title of Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle).

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But if we go further back into history we find that *campus* originally referred not just to any field but to the variety found in rolling countryside and is related to the Greek word *kampê* 'a bend in a river' from the verb *kamptô* 'to bend',ADVERT 'to turn'.

Another related noun was *kamara,* applied to almost anything with a bent or curved covering and this further developed until it showed up again in French as *chambre* 'room' from which we derive the word chamber.

But the same word also acquired an even more precise application. It came to designate not only a covered or vaulted room but also a particular part of a room with a specially constructed arch designed to guide the smoke from the fire and out through the roof. In other words *kamara* also produced the Greek *kaminos* 'oven' and Latin *caminus* 'forge'. With the passage of time all these ideas came together and emerged in French as *chiminée*, which is our 'chimney'.

So when we listen to the experts waffling on about this match or that player we can perhaps muse on the fact that this year's champion is not a million miles away, linguistically speaking, from the architectural device designed to get rid of all that gas and hot air! ■

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