

TAKING BACK THE TITLE

Sports Illustrated

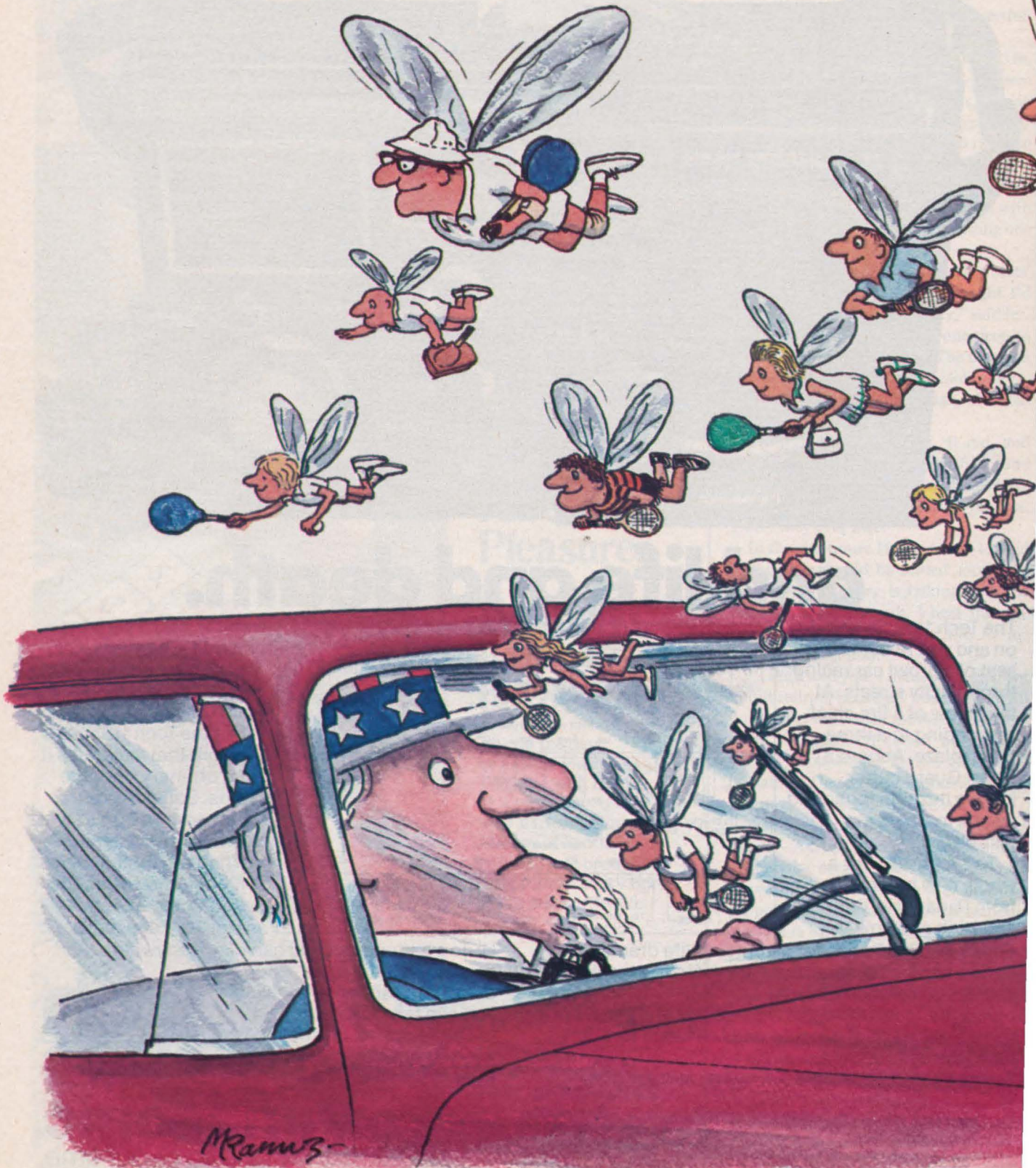
NOVEMBER 11, 1974

75 CENTS

HOW ALI FOOLED THEM ALL



NOW EVERYBODY HAS



THE BUG

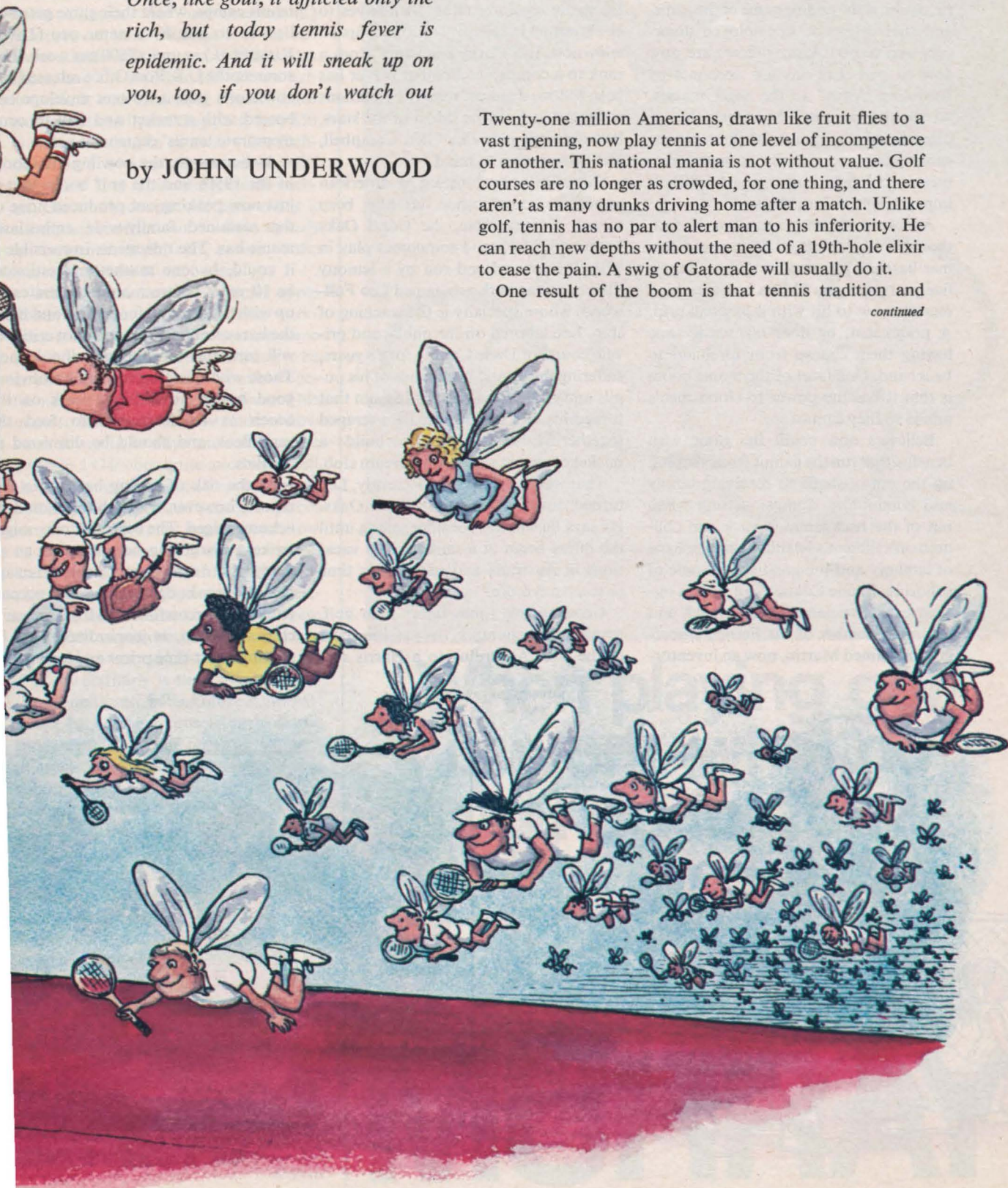
Once, like gout, it afflicted only the rich, but today tennis fever is epidemic. And it will sneak up on you, too, if you don't watch out

by JOHN UNDERWOOD

Twenty-one million Americans, drawn like fruit flies to a vast ripening, now play tennis at one level of incompetence or another. This national mania is not without value. Golf courses are no longer as crowded, for one thing, and there aren't as many drunks driving home after a match. Unlike golf, tennis has no par to alert man to his inferiority. He can reach new depths without the need of a 19th-hole elixir to ease the pain. A swig of Gatorade will usually do it.

One result of the boom is that tennis tradition and

continued



TENNIS BUG *continued*

etiquette are being trampled on daily as public courts bubble over with beginners and gaudy new tennis clubs with sauna baths and inflationary fees spring up like snapdragons. But this is not so objectionable when you consider that participation is the middle name of the game, and that otherwise unemployed divorcees and retired Army officers are now able to pad their savings accounts by becoming "pros" to the eager masses. At slightly cut rate, they teach the rudiments of the game to housewives, career girls and chubby account executives no longer embarrassed by their impenetrable awkwardness.

Awkward tennis players are, in fact, the rule. In Atlanta, a 56-year-old former baseball player who took up tennis five years ago gets \$14 an hour teaching recruits how to hit with a baseball grip. A pragmatist, he does not waste time having them change from forehand to backhand. One facet of the tennis boom is that it has the power to cloud men's minds so they cannot see.

Believers now credit the game with benefits that run the gamut from shaping up the out-of-shape to resolving family and community slumps; getting wives out of the backgammon ruck and children off Gilligan's Island; being the bane of lethargy and the great social tonic of suburbia. In one Connecticut town a nuclear executive named McCormack and a former member of the French Underground named Martin, now an inventor-

entrepreneur, have given up golf and soccer, respectively, to converge on tennis. They rearrange their international flight plans in order to make Monday, Wednesday and Sunday doubles matches.

Politicians and movie stars struck by the game regularly allow themselves to be shown up in celebrity tournaments on television. Bill Cosby's advance from a rank to a competent amateur player has been followed almost weekly by millions watching such events. Most of the stars, however, still play like Glen Campbell, and do not seem to mind.

Out of this phenomenon of American awareness some justice has also been served. For example, the Coral Oaks Tennis Club, where I sometimes play in Miami, is owned and run by a lemony little one-time park pro named Leo Fullwood, whose specialty is the teaching of spin. Leo labored on the public and private courts of Dade County for 28 years, suffering the erratic backhands of his pupils and ennui from the Florida sun that turned his skin to cork. He then scraped together \$1,000 and began to build—a bucket of clay at a time—his dream club.

That was five years ago. Recently, Leo turned down \$700,000 for Coral Oaks. He says he will not consider selling until the offers begin at a million. Leo vacations in Australia and seldom has time to teach anymore.

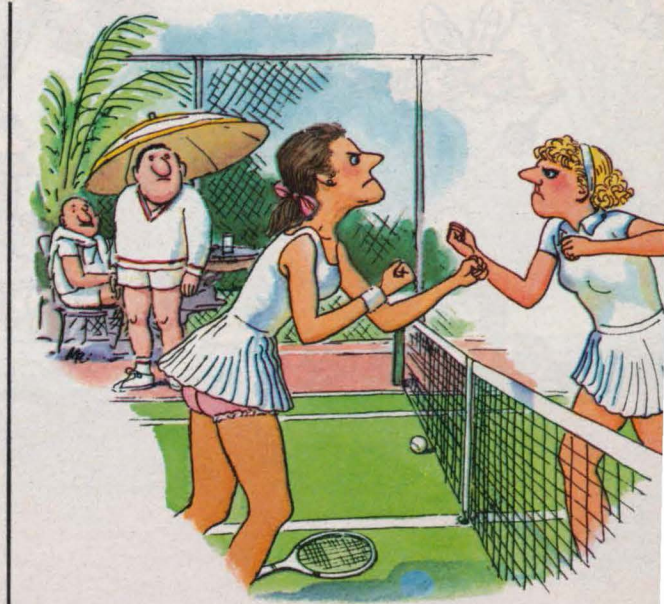
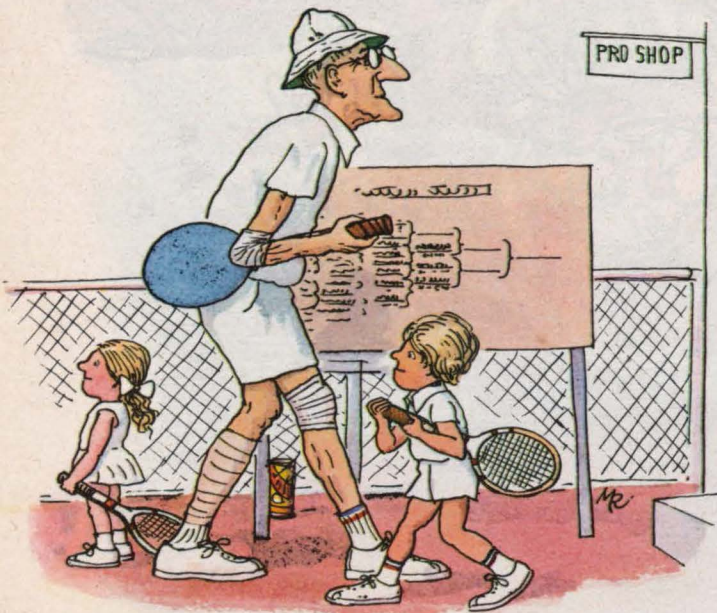
Growing five times faster than golf, tennis is, indisputably, the passion sport of the '70s. According to a Harris sur-

vey, it is now preferred over golf as both a sport to play and to watch. Televised tournaments have multiplied from three a year to three a month. A hundred thousand adults spend at least a week of their vacation time at one of the nation's 200 tennis camps, where their game gets bulled up to size by a name pro (Laver, King, *et al.*) at up to \$500 per week. This summer the U.S. Post Office released as a collector's item a 10-cent envelope embossed with a racket and ball to commemorate tennis' centennial year.

As booms go, the bowling miniboom of the 1950s and the golf boom that is just now peaking out produced none of the sustained family-wide enthusiasm tennis has. The tide seems irreversible—it could, by one marketer's estimate, be 10 years before manufacturers catch up with the demand for rackets and balls, the bare essentials. No pea-shot criticism will turn this around, and should not. Those who question the game's obvious good health would see a walk on the beach as an invitation to feed the sand fleas, and should be dismissed as lunatics.

At the risk of adding balance to this report, however, a few bites should be acknowledged. The costs, for one, might strike a discerning beachcomber as already out to sea. Tennis' proletarian appeal as a low-budget game, which accompanied its successful break from country-club snobbism, is jeopardized now by soaring court-time prices and lesson fees.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL RAMUS



TENNIS BUG continued

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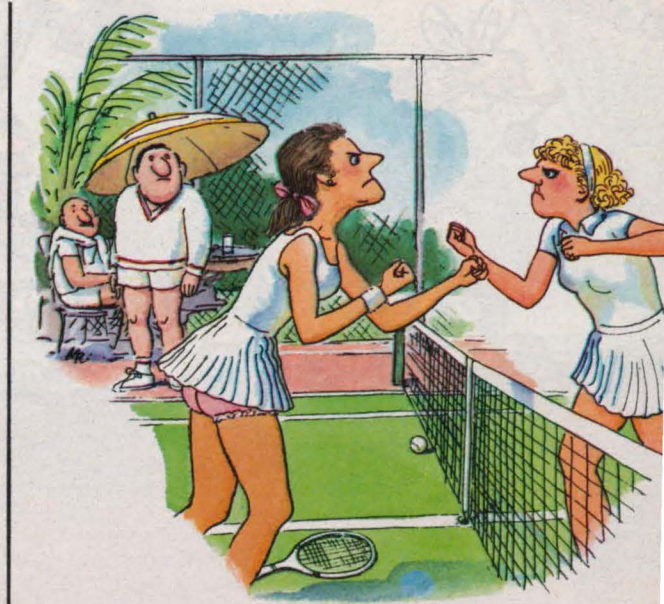
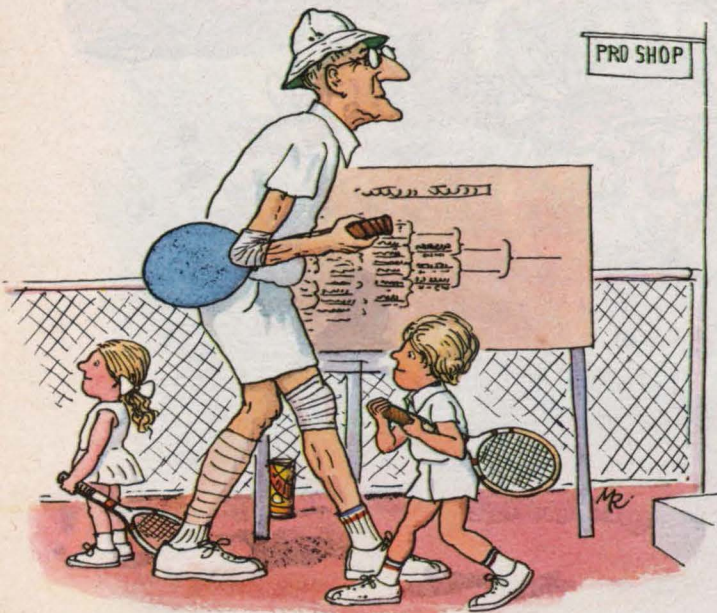
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL RAMUS



It is conceivable today that a man or woman could spend thousands of dollars to taste the wine of that first crisp serve. (Gardnar Mulloy asks \$50 an hour at the Fontainebleau on Miami Beach, clearly on the assumption that anyone who wants a lesson *that* bad deserves it.)

Moreover, when he slips into his \$26 Head double-knit shorts and \$28 Adidas shoes, and she into her \$75 Ginori ballerina knit with matching sweater (lace panties optional), and they pack their \$50 Gucci tennis bag to go swat a few fuchsia-colored \$4-a-can Penn tennis balls with their \$145 Chemold graphite rackets, the tennis couple will have made a staggering contribution to style as well as commerce. Style, alas, is one of the larger amplifiers of the boom.

Other worms in this particular apple do not stand out so boldly. For the workaday tennis professional there are some subtle financial traps. It is one thing to be an enthusiastic capitalist—a pro in Phoenix named Martinez recently changed his name to Martennis when he realized how sweet it was to be alive and teaching the game in 1974—but quite another to sell the matching headbands, heat balms and ball hoppers the trade journals exhort him to. The stockpiles in pro shops grow to the ceilings, resulting in more than a few pros waking up with a \$50,000 inventory and a \$5,000 clientele. One Western sportswear salesman estimates there are 25,000 tennis dresses for every woman player in his area.

More alarming is the exploitation of the group lesson, a heretofore honest attempt by teaching pros to provide the fundamentals to beginners and children at a reasonable cost. In some large metropolitan areas the group lesson is fast becoming a group hustle. A pro who may or may not have been the fifth man on his high school team signs up 100 kids, promising a mass transfusion of technique. For \$10 a series, the pupil gets to hit maybe five balls, a weekly lesson. He earns what you would expect him to earn hitting five balls a week. This is also known as "baby-sitting" by some pros.

Meanwhile, those who have already wearied of the crowded cockpits at public parks and clubs and have the money to do it, can, in a walk through the Yellow Pages, find any number of paving contractors willing to charge \$20,000 and to lay down a Har-Tru backyard court complete with windscreens and lights. An

continued



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TENNIS BUG continued

estimated 100,000 of these private oases now grace the suburbs from Simsbury, Conn. to Santa Barbara, Calif. There are, however, no guarantees of playing time. Owners sometimes have to beat off the neighbors' kids at 7 a.m. to get on. I know of one man who had his net slashed for discriminating against some teen-age strangers who tried to commandeer his court for a quick game or two. Furthermore, when a court owner turns on the lights for a night match, the neighbors are liable to turn up with the cops. One successful injunction that blacked out a court in Colorado argued that it looked like a used car lot.

To be sure, these are growing pains and not necessarily chronic, but to a tennis purist anything resembling permanent damage is suspect, and easily the most terrifying aspect of the tennis boom to him are the blows to the game's protocol—the creeping anarchy on the courts. World Team Tennis, which not only allows boorish behavior but advertises it in an effort to reproduce Ebbets Field, receives some of the blame for this, but is innocent. The WTT is merely trying to cover up basic flaws in its format. The WTT is not in the least responsible for the colorful behavior of the new breed of implacable rule-breakers and bad sports who can be found every day on private and public courts, dressed in cut-off jeans and striped beach shirts, and conventional whites as well, and making good progress toward converting tennis into a blood sport. Interestingly enough, much of this behavior is not manmade.

I have a neighbor, an otherwise rational mother of two, who annually submits to the lobotomy of being on the Women's B Team at a nearby yacht and tennis club. Her bottom lip trembles as she tells of her regular encounters with the backbiters, undercutters, character assassins and cheats who make up the various squads at her club. Last season two of these ladies had a fistfight on the court over a line call. The club pro, a man of immense tact and cold feet, will not touch the women's affairs with a 10-foot pole.

When the B Team reassembled this year, my neighbor, who had been having trouble with her back, was phoned by the team captain—a longtime friend whom she had introduced to the game and used to hit balls to by the hour—and told she had been put on injury waivers. "You can't be on the team," my

neighbor was told. She said that after the initial shock she was more relieved than heartbroken. She vowed to spend more time with her bromeliads.

In the interest of putting these various parts of the tennis boom into a workable perspective, to tie them together for scrutiny and understanding, as one might reconstruct a colossus from the cut pieces in a meat case, an editor in New York who shares my infatuation for the game suggested we isolate on one particularly smitten area, go and give it the cool, appraising eye of the historian. A "tennis town," he said, where the game had burgeoned. "Take your racket," he said.

Denver, says Cliff Buchholz, the tennis pro and club developer, was ripe for a tennis jag because "it is a young, active, moneyed population that enjoys its leisure time." There are almost as many tennis programs in Denver as there are tennis courts. Under a variety of banners, citizens stage clinics, hold tournaments for all ages, take the game to the underprivileged and occupy every court in town almost around the clock.

There are 112 public courts in Denver, twice what there were five years ago and about half what is now needed. At City Park, Berkeley Park, Congress Park and Washington Park, the supply was routed by the demand. Tempers flared collectively. Management Consultant Leo Hagele, himself a shut-out at one time or another, formed a "Tennis Action Group," called "TAG," to act as a cattle prod for improvements and for a tennis center of 50 courts or more, where fees could be charged and time limits imposed.

The center is still not in prospect, but under the duress existing courts were improved and Raoul Tayon, the city's recreation supervisor, was given a "healthier budget" that included plans to sprinkle 21 more courts throughout the city. "Our attitude," said Tayon, "is that there's never enough. We can't build them fast enough."

Don Carleton, area representative for Wilson Sporting Goods and president of the Colorado Youth Tennis Foundation, was no more optimistic. "Too many people are learning how to play," said Carleton, "then going out and discovering the courts are already taken. Often they are occupied by people taking lessons who won't find a place to play when they've

learned. We have overpromoted the sport. It has gotten away from us."

"How long you been waiting?"

"Almost an hour."

"An hour? Well, hell, that ain't bad. Hang in there. We waited almost two hours last night for a court. You play here often?"

"My first time. I don't think I've got it figured out yet. I mean, I don't know when my turn comes up. There doesn't seem to be a pattern."

"Naw, you're on your own here. You have to wait it out or you challenge."

The visitor's interrogator is a hairy young man in his early 20s. He is wearing glasses and a black-and-gold sweat shirt designated as PROPERTY STOLEN FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT, and he is leaning against the fence with his racket between his knees.

"I could tell you hadn't played here," he says, gesturing. "Your whites. Most of us don't wear them. As you can see, formal tennis this ain't."

The visitor has been waiting since the lights came on at the City Park courts, blanching out the elm trees behind and giving the busy scene a filtered, gossamery quality. From his vantage point on a bench beside the walkway dividing the two rows of courts, four on each side, the visitor can watch the action all around through the chain link fencing. There are no windscreens to conceal play. He can also see a horseshoe game in progress on the other side but the sounds of the shoes hitting home are muffled by the noise on the courts. Behind each court there is at least one waiting party.

"How do you mean, 'challenge'?" he asks.

"The challenge system. You know, challenge another team that's just won, if you're next in line. Or if two guys are playing singles and you think you can play at their level, you can challenge them to doubles. Doubles take precedence. But you gotta pick on somebody in your class or it's bad form."

The interrogator has settled on the bench. "Where you play?" he says.

"Back East. Usually on clay."

"Boy, I never even *seen* a clay court. I'd love to play on one some day. But, hey, these are good. They've been resurfaced this year. Not too fast, not too slow. Plexicoat, or Plexipave, something. The

continued

best public courts in Denver. You see good tennis here, too. Some of these guys are terrific."

A cry from two courts down on the other side of the walk diverts the interrogator's attention.

"That's my partner," he says, jumping up. "We're on. Hey, listen. Good luck."

"Yeah, you, too."

The visitor settles back on the bench in time to see a boy of about 12, shirtless, wearing basketball shoes without socks or laces, chase a ball across three courts, directly through the line of play. Their games suspended, the court occupants follow the boy's progress without comment. A man with a goatee waiting at the fence beside an Adidas bag that has a built-in racket holder shakes his head and sucks his teeth audibly. Like the visitor, he is in tennis whites.

A young couple moves down from the other side of the goateed man to where the visitor is sitting. They have been moving from court to court like honeybees searching for the likeliest spot. The young man takes a reconnoitering position against the fence, his fingers and nose poking through, and the girl sits down on the bench.

The young man turns to inspect the visitor. He apparently had not noticed him before and the discovery does not seem to please him.

"You waiting for this court, mister?"

"No, not really. I've about given up."

He smiles and comes over.

"You shouldn't get discouraged," he says. "You may have to scout around a little, but one'll open up. I've gotten so I know instinctively where and who to psych."

"To psych?"

"Who to go up to and say, 'How long you been playing?' Or, 'You about done?'"

"What if they keep playing?"

"Then it's not a good psych."

"How come they don't have a starter, with a list and all?"

"City can't afford it, I guess. The same reason they don't put screens up."

"What if you want a lesson or something? I've been thinking I might need a couple."

"The parks have clinics. Mob scenes. You have to sign up early and wait for a series to start. My wife forgets to call and gets shot down every time. Or you go to

a club pro. Or—see that guy over there?" He is pointing to a corner court where three black men and a white, all wearing conventional tennis gear, are engaged in an intense doubles match. It is the best tennis being played at City Park. The man singled out is in his 30s and has the most enviable strokes of the four.

"They call him Chauncy. I understand he gives lessons. Five bucks an hour. I don't know his last name, but there are two or three who hang around here who give lessons. Chauncy's supposed to be the best."

"He's a pro?"

"Not really. I'm not sure what he does, except that he plays a lot of tennis. Whenever I've been here *he's* been here."

"Oh, damn!"

The young man's delicate-looking wife has entered the conversation.

"Whatsamatter?"

"While we're sitting here yakking we missed that end court. Those kids just came right up and took it. Oh, damn!"

"Don't sweat it," says the young man.

"I'm putting the psych on these two in front of us. We'll challenge the couple on the far side. Watch the way the big guy's serving. See that? Lotta spin. Like Laver. You gotta get your racket back in a hurry. . . ."

When the visitor left City Park just before 10 p.m., having not so much as unsheathed his racket, all the courts were still occupied. The young married couple were holding their own against the ersatz Laver and his wife. Laver was having trouble getting his spin in, double-faulting even in the face of the delicate girl, who seemed to be getting her racket back in fine threatening style. The goateed man had found a singles game on the next court and his match drew a small audience behind both fences.

Chauncy, meanwhile, had finished his match and was conducting what appeared to be a seminar on the backhand for two of those he had played with. The visitor toyed with the idea of asking him for some lessons but thought better of it and treated himself instead to a pizza and a beer for less than \$5.

Five years ago the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association accepted open tennis and updated its amateur code to allow some playing amateurs to teach the game for a living. Club pros proliferated like socks in a drawer and now are too numerous to

count. In Denver, most of those who teach also play in tournaments. Jim Landin, the pro at the Jewish Community Center Tennis Club, has, at 39, won the Men's 35 National Indoors championships in 1971 and 1974 and is the only adult player in Denver to be nationally ranked in singles. Those distinctions did not keep him from getting fired from a good job at the Pinehurst Country Club when, after four years, Landin said he "lost communication."

"The pro no longer has the club owner by the throat," says Landin. "If he doesn't communicate, there are plenty of guys who will." It is, he says, a bewildering time. Bringing the masses to tennis not only disrupted its form and dulled its fine points but gave club pros a delicious opportunity to work themselves to death and out of jobs.

"We get money-hungry," says Landin. "We play a tournament, and the next day when it's 100° on the court we go out and give 21 lessons. And when we've worn ourselves out we bite the head off the first guy who asks a civil question. Tennis is growing so fast it's wobbling. It's our job to give it stability, to remember that we're here to serve people."

One who remembers and has resisted the sirenic urge to cash in is Richard Hillway, the state's third-ranked amateur and coach of the state champion Cherry Creek High team, a winner of 53 straight matches. At Cherry Creek more boys turn out for Hillway's tennis team (66) than for football. In the summer Hillway, 31, runs the tennis program at the Village club, to supplement his income. But he turned down the prestigious Denver Country Club job and gave up the position at the Araphoe Tennis Club, where he would have made a lot more than his schoolteacher's salary.

As a club pro in boomsville, Hillway found if he wanted to spend extra time with a pupil, he no longer had it to spend. "Not every kid wants to go to Wimbledon," he said, "some just want to play. I'm not going to say, 'Listen, you gotta be No. 1.' But if a kid wants a few more hits, I want the time to hit with him."

"I don't want to be a tennis pro, as such. You ever seen a guy who's been a club pro 20 years? Twelve months a year? He's like a robot. He can't talk about anything else. He can't *do* anything else. That's not for me. I'm a schoolteacher. I like my weekends off."

continued

TENNIS BUG continued

Irwin J. Hoffman, slightly stoop-shouldered, dark fried-out hair, in a pastel yellow tennis outfit and steel-rimmed glasses, is fluttering around from court to court, trailing along the edges of the tennis wake like a large yellow gull. He has been the tennis pro at the Green Gables Country Club since 1957, when there were only two cement courts and his was a part-time job. Now there are six, with Lakold surfaces, and they are taken by proper-looking players properly dressed. Many of them exhibit the good clean strokes Hoffman taught them. He has, for some time, been called the best teaching pro in Denver.

"When I started here, I had 15 pupils," says Hoffman. "I was some place for them to be two hours a day. For the entire summer I made \$237." His smile after each sentence is like punctuation. Against his deep brown face his teeth stand out like popcorn. He is giving his visitor a history lesson as they walk.

"Some of them were not too eager. I had to borrow a motorboat to go capture them off their sailboats. 'Your mother paid me to give you tennis lessons and by God you're going to practice,' I said."

The pro who had the Green Gables job before Irwin "just handed it over" because there was no money in it. In Denver there were two worthwhile tennis jobs: at the Denver Country Club and the Denver Tennis Club. Irwin estimates there are now at least 15 or 20. His former pupils have 80% of them—the Lakewood Country Club, Rolling Hills, etc.—set up by Hoffman for a percentage of the action. He has kept the concession (as head pro and manager) at the HeatherRidge indoor club for himself.

Like Rich Hillway, Irwin Hoffman is a high school teacher, with a Ph.D. in mathematics education. He teaches computer math at George Washington High, one of the first courses of its kind in the country. He has written seven monographs on the subject. Irwin once tried to put a tennis draw into a computer, but the computer clammed up.

To be the most successful tennis pro in Denver, Irwin Hoffman followed what he relates to be a logical ascension. "When the golf courses got crowded, and President Kennedy put everybody on a health kick, tennis was right there. The advent of the indoor courts made it possible for a pro to make a living year-round. In the last two years,

a guy who hustled could do very well." How well?

"I've had to learn. I've learned, for example, that the pro shop is a bad investment if mishandled. Two hundred people can't support one. I used to work 12 to 13 hours a day. I kept my own books because I didn't know any better. Do you realize how many years I broke the law because I didn't know about workmen's compensation?"

"My wife couldn't take it. She made me stop every night at 9 so we could talk. We talked until she went to bed at 11. Then I went back to work. Seven days a week, May to October. I wound up with a very expensive divorce."

Hoffman now is part of a syndicate that owns apartment houses and filling stations, and some raw land. He has a new wife and a \$110,000 home, with a tennis court. "And I have my own bookkeeper. The sign of a successful tennis operation is having your own buyer and own bookkeeper. All I do is sign the checks."

Irwin is on a court at Green Gables, teaching a gray-haired man in a golf cap the keyboard. One of Irwin's polite young players, a boy of 13 or 14, pats balls into the line of the man's flailing racket. The man is stiff-armed and straight-legged, as if he had been left out in the rain and had rusted.

"Relax, Jack," Irwin advises. "Relax. Get your racket back! Follow through!"

Jack stiff-arms one past the base line; another reaches the net on the third bounce. From his shoulder to the tip of his racket Jack is one long ax handle.

"Don't be tense, Jack. Calm down. Calm down!" Irwin stalks around his pupil like a boxer looking for an opening. Within the vortex of his instruction the pupil concentrates, his eyes wide and his lips pursed. "Snug that elbow in, Jack. And don't be tense."

With a massive effort Jack loosens and hits an acceptable forehand into the backcourt. Plop. Then another. Plop.

"Ahhh," coos Irwin. "Isn't that beautiful, Jack?"

Jack nods happily.

"He's 56 years old and just taking up the game," says Irwin when the lesson is over. He is fluttering back to the pro shop.

"A refugee from golf. I used to never get one. The first 10 years I didn't have a single adult, except the club's tennis

chairman. Now it's geriatric tennis, a whole new ball of wax. I have a woman 64 years old. She was shocked she could run. Some you got to watch out for—the guy who's 50 and thinks he's 25 and wants to hit aces. A pro has to know what he's doing. A lot of us don't.

"We have pros who can teach and pros who say they can teach. We need standardizing, like the PGA with its golf pros. Some clubs still hire social directors. A guy says, 'I'm a pro,' and if he's got a tan and can meet people he's in."

At the door of his pro shop Irwin is stopped by a woman who has drawn her daughter in the club tournament. She says it is a delicate situation, and what is Irwin going to do about it? Irwin says he is going to wish her good luck.

"Yesterday," says Irwin afterward, "I had a woman who complained that her son had to play the No. 1 seed. She said, 'It's not fair! It's his first match!' I said, 'Somebody has to.' She took up 40 minutes of my lunch hour trying to get the draw changed."

Irwin says he plays now more than he used to because he has won out over a chronic tennis elbow. "I couldn't lift a coffee cup. For eight years I taught left-handed." Pain, he says, transformed him into an expert on tennis elbows. Four orthopedic surgeons in Denver shoot their problem cases with cortisone and ship them to Irwin to cure. He treats their strokes.

"Tension is the worst," says Irwin. He is heading for the clubhouse and a luncheon. "When I give a lesson, the first thing I look at is the grip. If you hit a ball and your arm feels it, it's wrong. If a racket resonates into your arm you can damage the elbow, the shoulder. Wooden rackets are best because they dampen the shock waves. I sell metal rackets in my shop, but reluctantly.

"Hey, Carol!"

A pretty dark-haired woman in shorts, dragging a small boy by the hand, intersects Irwin's progress in the clubhouse foyer. Irwin kisses her cheek. "One of my originals," he says expansively. "Oh, how lovely she turned out. Carol, tell this man how it was when we started."

"He dragged us out of the pool to practice," says Carol, expertly fielding the request. "I'd say, 'No, Irwin, it's too hot.' He wouldn't listen. He had us hitting balls over the chaise longues by the pool."

continued

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TENNIS BUG *continued*

"Yes, and on the fairways of the golf course," Irwin says cheerily. He loves to talk about it. "We used to string off the lines and chalk off the parking lot. When I had all of them out there playing, I'd go complain to the club. 'Somebody's going to get killed!' I was lobbying for more courts. They were furious. The more fuss we made the more enemies I made. I said, 'Gentlemen, I just can't control these kids. They're crazy for tennis.'

"I started a petition to get more courts and I was told I was undermining the club. I had to go to the membership to keep my job. Hey, Carol, is this your boy?"

Irwin bends so that he is nose-level with the woman's son, who gives him a blank look.

"He's ready for you, Irwin."

"How old is he?"

"Four and three-quarters."

"Bring him around and I'll have him throw me a ball." Irwin straightens. "It's a test. If he can get it to me five or six times in a row he's ready. Throwing is a related action. That's one of the problems I have with the ladies."

On this day, Irwin is presiding over a women's luncheon on the club terrace overlooking the pool. As a special treat, the women will hear Pam Austin of the Denver Racquets, the WTT team, and some of Irwin's juniors will model new fashions. He has \$8 worth of decorated balls and a lace-lined racket cover for door prizes and the patio tables are decorated with red-and-white carnations protruding from empty Wilson ball cans.

"Most of my problems are with women," says Irwin, glancing around. He has partially filled his plate with cold cuts and relish items from the buffet line, and between disinterested bites parries a run of table-hoppers.

"I love 'em but the women are tough as hell," he says. "The thing is they're new to competition. They never had to pass through the poor-sport stage. Men have usually outgrown it by the time they're in high school. Most women playing tennis are now into that stage. Except they're not 14, they're 40.

"During a tournament I pay one of my assistants \$5 an hour just to field the women's gripes. I tell him, 'Whatever you do, smile. In every circumstance, no matter how ridiculous, smile.'" Irwin demonstrates with a toothy grimace.

continued

TENNIS BUG continued

"I have a machine at home that saves my life. The machine takes complaints on a tape, from 10 to 12 daily. They yell at me on that tape. They beat me to pieces. 'My boy lost because you didn't teach him a backhand volley!' They hate my machine because it doesn't talk back. When they've calmed down, I call them."

The framework of tennis shifts and broadens to accommodate the newness, to admit strange new stimuli. A star-struck Denver mother is sending her daughter to Australia to polish her game, though the girl is not good enough to win at home. At the venerable Denver Tennis Club, a local judge arrives from his bench daily for a regular noon match, and in the winter a foursome whose ages begin in the 70s still comes every morning; sometimes they must push the snow off in order to play.

The Denver Tennis Club was founded in 1928, and has 12 courts, all outdoors. It is still strictly tennis, but is increasingly co-ed. Sherrie Pruitt, who used to beat Stan Smith when they were growing up in California, was once the pro, and the manager is a 27-year-old practical nurse with big brown eyes named Mary Spalding. Women are now on the various competition ladders, four in the coveted "A" group, challenging the best male players for spots up-ladder. Matches are arranged by phone. Miss Spalding, herself on the "A" ladder, says the men don't usually call the women.

The women come to tennis desperate to learn. They take lesson after lesson, and often regress because they are afraid to play. In a scene repeated often, a woman in starched new gear asked an athletic-looking young man at Washington Park, "Do you give lessons?" "No," said the man. "Well," said the woman, "do you know anybody who does?"

Judie Heppenstall is sitting with her back to the Steinway piano in the house she has recently purchased on Holly Road. The Steinway would have been her living had she not, as a young divorcée with two small boys, discovered that more people want to pound a tennis ball than a piano. Beyond the Steinway and a picture window and past a row of pine trees, an earthmover is slicing into the gravel that will be the last layer

of base for her private court. The house and court are in Englewood, a suburb of Denver.

"I'm taking a chance buying this, building the court," she says. "I know that. It scares me, but I'm not looking back. Most of the people out here are loaded. I'm out here to make a living."

She is blonde and blue-eyed, in her 30s, with a figure still shipshape. She had studied to be a concert pianist in New York, but marriage had brought her to Denver, where the piano-playing market was bad. "They think you play for fun out here," she says.

In October of 1969 a man drove his car through a stop sign and put Judie Heppenstall through her windshield. There were five operations on her neck. Vertebrae were fused. She cannot turn her head a normal range.

"I was sitting around recovering, in my brace, looking for something to do," she says. "I'd never played tennis as a kid, but my husband had been a squash champion, so when we came here in 1960 we started it. I took lessons from Sherrie Pruitt. In those days you could walk up to the Denver Tennis Club and ask, 'How much to join?' Now there's a three-year wait.

"Anyway, we wound up at the Crestmore Swim and Tennis Club, and I won a few trophies that didn't amount to much. Silver in the closet. At the time I had around 25 kids taking piano at \$5 an hour. Some of my friends started asking if I'd teach them tennis. I guess they were embarrassed to go to a real pro. I said, sure, if you like. It's the same principle as piano—the one-to-one relationship.

"I went back to Sherrie to take lessons on how to give lessons. I was going to go to a three-day clinic at Vale and I had read a couple books on tennis strategy. One by Billy Talbert, and I think one Tilden wrote, *The Psychology of Tennis*, something like that. It was a paperback I found in my husband's den."

Judie is on the edge of her chair. Being interviewed is a new experience and she is tentative. "So I started teaching, and what surprised me was that people were clamoring to learn. Last spring I turned down 10 whom I'd never even heard of. I was just out of the hospital and couldn't handle too much. I mean, total strangers. Oh, listen, excuse me—would you like some coffee?"

"My philosophy might be a little different from the others, because I think people want to learn to play *right now*. A good pro will teach them strokes and tell them they'll get it together in five years, and maybe that's right. But some girls I know never play, they just take lessons. I try to get them to enjoy *playing*, from the start."

Judie charges \$12 an hour for private instruction (as compared to, say, Irwin Hoffman's \$18); for a series of six half-hour lessons, she gets \$30. "Most people take the package," she says. "If two students double up, it's \$8 a half-hour. Come on, I want you to see my court."

She is up again, moving. "When it's finished, I'm going to rent court time to another pro for \$2 an hour. She has 15 or 20 pupils and has a hard time finding places, too." She leads the way through the pine trees and onto the ground that has been opened and leveled.

"I've built it myself," she says with a short nervous laugh. "Subcontracted everything. People thought I was nuts. But I was in a hurry. A builder quoted me \$12,750 to do the whole thing, which was in line, but he said he was 15 courts behind and no telling when he'd get to it. Who knows what the price would be then? Lakold has gone up at least 27% since last year. That's the surface everybody uses. One contractor told me they could charge whatever they want and get it.

"I was two weeks on the phone before I had the first subcontractor out here. 'What do you recommend?' 'What kind of fencing?' 'What about the water rights?' The water rights are a big thing in Colorado. I had to put in 240 feet of pipe to protect my neighbor.

"You'd be surprised how much I learned. About drains. Soil. Tension wires. Zoning. Oh, my, the zoning is unreal. But I had the time to do it, and I learned to bargain."

If she has figured right, Judie Heppenstall says, she will pay \$5,200 for grading and paving, another \$2,000 for the Lakold surface, \$4,200 for fencing. With curbs, drains and landscaping "it'll come to about \$13,500 without nets and screens."

She puts her hands on her hips and, half-smiling, surveys her creation, as though it were artwork.

"So far, I love it. I really do. They say I'm nuts. I hope not."

continued

TENNIS BUG continued

Don Carleton of Wilson estimates the demand for tennis equipment in Denver has gone up 10 times since 1968. "I used to be a salesman, but I haven't had to sell a ball for two years," he says. "I just write orders. I have become a helluva order writer."

The Wilson "Jack Kramer" racket, the most popular in America, sold for \$16 when Carleton began peddling in the Rockies in 1967. It now sells for up to \$30. To string it, the price has gone from \$9 to \$15-\$25. College students are working their way through school stringing rackets. The Colorado School for the Blind has 10 stringing machines going 24 hours a day.

"I used to give rackets and balls away to help the kid programs," says Carleton. "I can't anymore." The Wilson plants have doubled production in Cortland, N.Y. and in Belgium. Spalding has done the same at Fort Smith and Chicopee, Mass. The frenzy to produce, triggered by a rush on the market by op-

portunists less concerned with quality control, has resulted in a glut of defective equipment—balls that do not bounce, rackets that fall apart.

Art Hagan, who with his brother runs the Aspen Leaf sports shop in suburban Cherry Creek and strings more rackets than anyone in Denver, says the eagerness of the latecomers to line their shelves and the gullibility of the pros have created in tennis a vast "phony market."

"The little country club pro has no more business sense than the man in the moon," says Hagan. "He buys all this useless stuff, and it lies around the shop. Here, look at all this junk." Hagan thumbs through a trade magazine. The magazine insinuates that the pro shop without Mr. Tennis cocktail glasses is poorly equipped, and that a smart pro would make better use of his space with these new lockers.

"I have to hold my sides laughing," says Hagan. "There's a guy here who just opened a ski and tennis boutique because

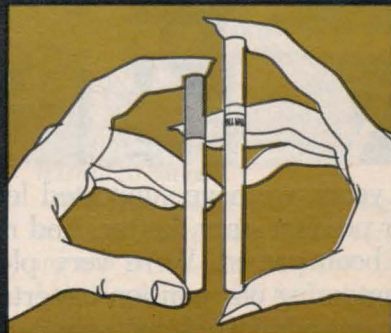
his wife couldn't get the dresses she wanted at May D. & F. His shop rents at \$8 a square foot. Profitability is a pipe dream. It's crazy.

"I don't know of a single pro shop making money in merchandise sales. The manufacturers don't help because when they distribute equipment they feel compelled to give Jo-Jo the pro five rackets, or 10, and when they get to us and we need 1,000, they've only got 300 left. It's all foolishness. A tennis shop isn't the same as a golf shop. People can buy cheaper here or at a department store, and that's what they do. It's a good thing for the pros that tennis is such a great game."

Jerry Gart has his visitor in tow. They are in an electric cart, going up the ramp from the first floor of the Gart Brothers' "Sports Castle" at 10th and Broadway. The store is 58,000 square feet of sports equipment, from the cut-rate to the exotic. The Castle used to be a Chrysler

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dealership. The regal gingerbread on the facade was retained when the Garts moved in. It was Jerry Gart's idea to use the automobile ramps to transport people up and down the store. On the Castle roof, where the cars used to gather dust, Gart put in a tennis court, with a high fence to keep the balls from raining on downtown Denver.

"We have a slogan, 'Buy a racket, get a lesson,'" says Gart, making the turn at the second floor and speeding up. The cart hums under him. "We have a tennis pro up there, and it doesn't matter what tennis equipment you buy, you get a free half-hour lesson. The pro profits from sales, too. He's a businessman, just like the rest of us. You'll meet one of his teaching assistants, Diane. A real looker. Brings in a lot of business. The court is always in use. I can't even get on."

Gart makes another turn, stops and bounces out of the cart where the tennis boom has exploded onto the counters and walls of his store. One wall is festooned with 2,200 rackets, from a \$3.95 Winston to a \$145 Garcia, pinned there like laboratory specimens.

"Our tennis sales have increased 300% this year," says Gart. "We'll sell 75,000 units—clothes, balls, sweatbands, shoes. We sell 18 different brands of tennis shoes. You name 'em, we got 'em. We'll sell 6,000 rackets. I remember when we were lucky to sell 100."

Gart is tanned and dapper, with the manicured, lacquered look of a television sportscaster. He says, however, that as an athlete he is late-blooming—he now skis, plays golf and is hooked on tennis, "just like everybody."

On the roof, the pro is giving a slim blonde girl in tennis clothes a lesson. Diane is not around. Gart takes his visitor to the Castle parapets, from where Pike's Peak and Long's Peak are visible in the distance. When the girl is through with her lesson, she introduces herself to Gart as a stewardess who had served him on a Continental Airlines flight into Den-

ver. Gart says he remembers. "I never forget a pretty face," he says.

As the girl exits down the ramp, Gart looks her up and down. "See those shoes?" he says. "New. Probably bought them here. And the dress. That's one of ours. I didn't get a look at the racket, but she probably got that here, too. On that ramp they can see what's on every floor. It's no accident the tennis is up here. On the way down, they're liable to buy a racket, some skis, a fishhook, something."

Gart remounts and turns the cart to go back down. "As a businessman, I'm tickled to death about tennis," he says. "As a father, I'm taking my lumps. Next to skiing my three boys love tennis best. I can't keep my 16-year-old on the job, he's always off playing. I'll have a court in my yard pretty soon. We're a democratic family. My children voted for a court this year, and I put in a swimming pool. I didn't get away with it."

He has stopped the cart again. "See

continued



TENNIS BUG continued

this? Our conference room. See all this space? We filled it for Jack Kramer—more than 300 people in here to hear him talk. I don't know how much they bought on the way out, but I know it was worth it."

Two years ago there was a total of nine indoor tennis courts in all of Denver: two in a clapboard building at the Denver Country Club, two under a plastic bubble at Rolling Hills, one in a converted ice rink at the Mountain Shadows Swim Club and four at the six-year-old Colorado Racquet Club, the original indoor facility.

Today, Denver has five tennis clubs, with two more in construction that will bring the total to 45 indoor courts, not including the bubble that Marvin Davis, millionaire oilman, blows up behind his mansion every winter to satisfy his wife's appetite for the game, and to provide the likes of John Newcombe a quiet place to hit a ball or two.

These indoor clubs are no longer a slab of hard ground, a net and covering but are what Cliff Buchholz calls "the tennis country club"—gleaming, velvety, seductive tennis nests, elegantly appointed, elaborately stocked, and expensive.

Buchholz' company has built five around the country, one of them in Denver. It is called Tennis World, a \$2-million concession to tennis hedonists on prime business property in affluent southeast Denver.

Denver, says Buchholz, achieved this advanced station (Tennis World) by vaulting past the usual evolutionary process: from the bubbles and big barns of the East, which were no more than weather cheaters, to the prestressed-concrete buildings in an industrial area—where, if the tennis fizzled, a warehouse could salvage the investment—to the indoor facility that was only an adjunct of a health club.

Tennis World was two years in the making, including a year to secure the financing. The making includes twin radial-arch buildings, strikingly veneered; a pro shop and lounge with windows overlooking the eight Har-Tru courts; a health club and outdoor swimming pool; noise-muffling acoustics, shadowless lighting from vapor lights cast toward the ceiling; two video cameras for taping the students of the four working pros; and a staff of 15.

Tennis World opened—for 14 hours a day—last January to 95% occupancy. Memberships, the most expensive of which is the complete family package at \$750 a year and \$25 monthly dues, were soon past 1,000, with plans to cut them off at 1,400. The competition, also freshly minted and as lovely to look at, included Meadow Creek, the jewel inset of an exclusive housing complex for which General Manager Fonia Humphries spent a year visiting clubs across the country just to decide on a court surface; HeatherRidge, opened in conjunction with a condominium complex, where Irwin Hoffman is pro and 40% of the membership take lessons; and the newest, the West Hills Racquet Club in Lakewood.

If there is a clot in the tennis bloodstream, however, these country clubs may be it. Much of tennis' appeal has always been its relative inexpensiveness. Exercise on a low budget. Fun for peanuts. A man could play 10 tennis matches in 10 days for the price of one lost golf ball on a Sunday afternoon.

Cliff Buchholz likes to say that Tennis World provides "country club tennis at bowling alley prices," but at the prices (\$8-to-\$10-an-hour court fees during prime time) and the various fees and dues required for membership, his analogy is hardly apt. At the Denver Tennis Club (strictly tennis, all outdoors) a family membership costs \$500, annual dues are \$125 and there are no court costs. By comparison with either club, bowling is cheaper.

There is some doubt, too, that the investment is a sound one. Art Hagan points out that Tennis World is on land whose proximity to a gilt commercial complex and spa (Plaza de Monaco) makes it more a candidate for an office building with a parking garage on the roof than a lavish tennis club. Nevertheless, Buchholz says, Tennis World will return 20% on the investment, and that will be plenty to satisfy the tennis bugs who financed it.

Others have had their problems. Centre Court, under the aegis of Donald Dell and some of the WCT players, was at first bogged down in zoning problems, which have now been solved. Meadow Creek, whose appeal to begin with was snooty—"for the very fortunate few," its brochures read—and whose initiation fee was a fat \$1,250, is shaky. Fewer than half the 400 family memberships called

for have been filled. Roger Tilkemeier, the developer, was singing a worried song about being "underfinanced." He is now attempting to get a permanent loan and the banks have extended his construction loans to 1976.

For a visitor, with more casual woes, a voyage through these futuristic tennis enclaves is exhilarating no matter how many skeletons he may imagine hidden behind the slickness. When one who was wearing a white tennis outfit with pizza stains on the pants came to Tennis World on an August night, every court was taken and other hopeful players had their noses to the glass on the lounge floor. The visitor could not play, he was told, not being a member and not knowing anyone who was, but he suddenly itched to. He hung around.

He was not even put off when the icy blonde receptionist, who seemed annoyed that he had interrupted her phone call (apparently an important conference with her boyfriend), unsmilingly responded to his questions on potential membership. With slashing pencil, she reduced his options on the club's brochure and handed it over, making it clear he better get on the stick if he wanted to be a member.

The next day, when he stopped in at the West Hills Racquet Club, the visitor was even more tempted. A fine spray from the sprinklers dampened his pants as he went in, but once inside he was engulfed in a sea of blue-on-blue paneling, parquet floors and ultra-posh appointments. There was a television room for children, a nursery for infants. There was a superelaborate gym and a co-ed whirlpool bath (which the visitor noted was not occupied). Furthermore, he was told, there was *no* initiation fee and *no* monthly dues, just an annual \$180 charge and court fees from \$6 to \$8 in prime time.

A young man who identified himself as an assistant pro escorted the visitor to the courts, where a bearded boy in a tie-dyed shirt was playing on the first court with an older man in whites. The assistant pro, explaining that he was only here for the summer, admitted politely that he did not know what the dress code was, or if one existed.

The visitor asked the assistant if the head pro might not be available for a chat.

"Not right now," said the assistant. "He's taking a lesson."

END