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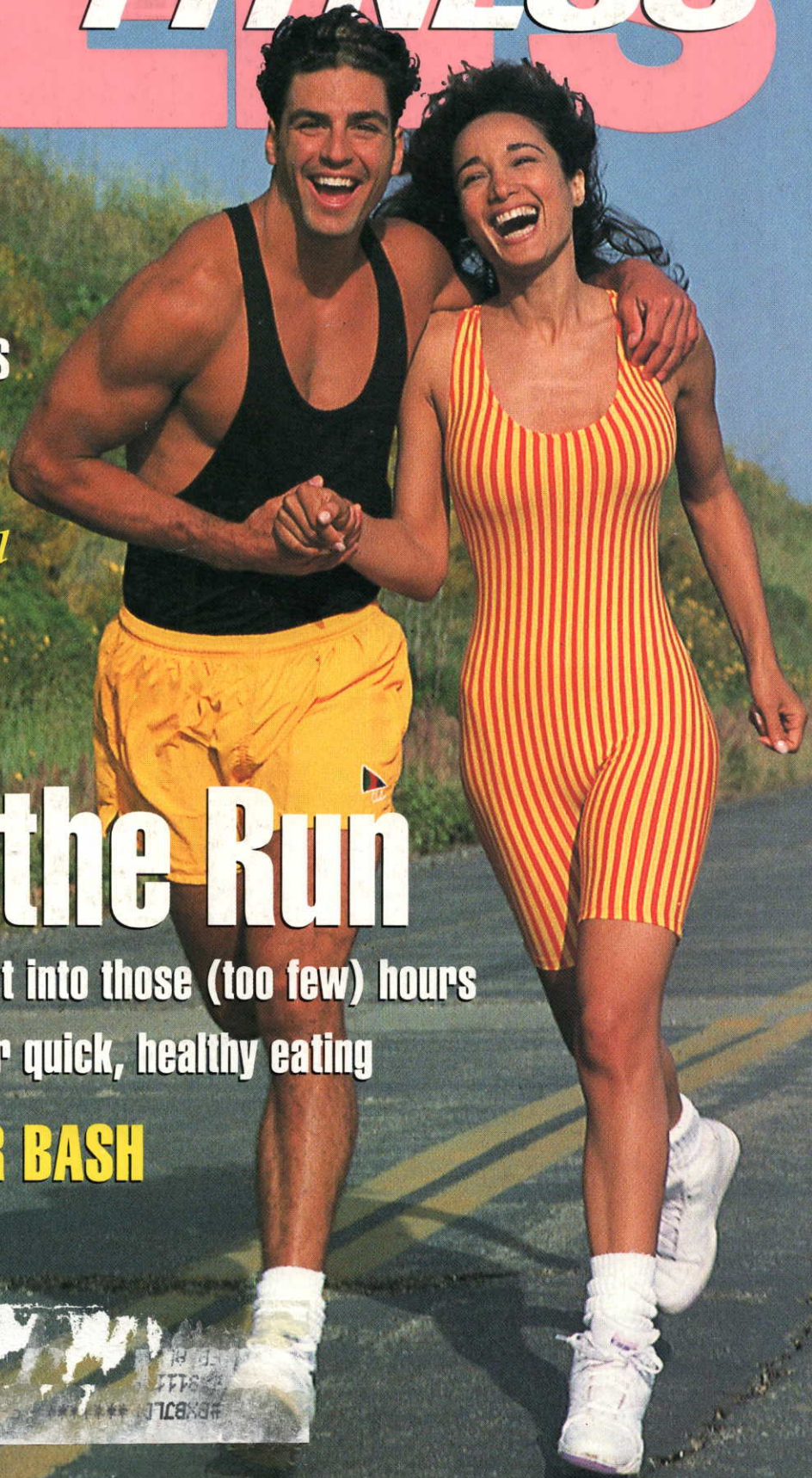
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Badminton Kicks Butt

The mood is volatile in the 12,000-seat arena. The spectators, packed shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip, scream for their favorite and taunt the opponent as if the future of civilization depended on each shot.

The players are among the best athletes in the world, sprinting and whirling and blasting 200-mile-an-hour shots at each other across the tiny playing surface, a task made harder by the home-court fans, who wear white T-shirts to keep visiting players from having a clear field of vision. To those fans, the hometown players are gods; they're mobbed after matches, begged to autograph bills of the local currency because it's believed everything these athletes touch turns to gold.

Welcome to the world of competitive badminton.

WHEN THE SHUTTLECOCK FLIES AT 200 MILES PER HOUR, YOU KNOW IT'S THE ULTIMATE RACQUET SPORT

BY DAVID LOTT

Wait. Badminton? The game you play on your lawn with burgers grilling in the background and Mom's prized rhododendrons as the out-of-bounds marker?

Only in America, land of Monday Night Football, is badminton given such a leisurely spin. In countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Sweden and Denmark, it's a national obsession.

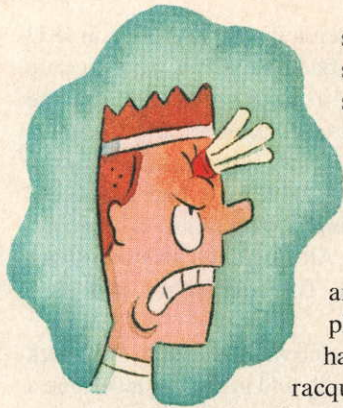
MYTH VS. REALITY

For millions of Americans, our first exposure to world-class badminton will come this summer when we watch the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. After succeeding as a demonstration sport in 1972 and 1988, badminton will be a medal sport for the first time.

Many who tune in will be surprised to find that badminton is an indoor sport; doubles are played on a 20-by-44-foot court, while for singles the dimensions are slightly smaller. The net is five feet high. The goosefeather shuttlecock (bird) is put into play with an underhand serve (one only), and as in volleyball, only the



ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG CLARKE



serving player or team can score points. The first to score 15 points wins a game; matches are three games.

Mostly, first-time viewers will be amazed at the game's speed and the incredible reflexes and dexterity of its top players. Dick Squires, who has been a champion in five racquet sports, including tennis, squash and platform tennis,

believes that badminton is by far the most demanding. "It's the most strenuous and fastest racquet sport at the top competitive level," Squires says. "There are no ground strokes; the bird can never touch the ground. You volley every shot."

Because the bird is always in the air, the players must throw themselves underneath it from corner to corner of the court in a never-ending race to get to it before the ground does. In fact, the bird is in the air about 50 percent of the time in a top-flight contest. In a 45-minute match, that's 20 minutes of action. A comparable tennis match would offer four minutes in which the ball is actually in flight. (See "Tennis vs. Badminton: Statistics Don't Lie," right.)

During those 20 minutes of championship-level badminton, a player will strike the shuttle some 400 times, and in the course of running, jumping, twisting, diving and backpedaling for his opponents' shots, he will change directions at least 350 times. Of those 400 strokes, 150 will be full-arm swings made with a racquet strung to 25 pounds of pressure, instead of the usual 17 or 18 pounds, to generate incredible speed, much like Bjorn Borg strung his tennis racquet up to 80 boardlike pounds.

Their shots, screaming along at between 165 and 200 miles an hour, are breathtakingly accurate. The better players are adept at holding their shots with a cocked wrist until the last possible moment, then flicking the racquet with pinpoint accuracy. Players try to drive their opponents deep into their own court, where they can't defend their frontcourt and from where they can't respond in kind. The operative word is reflexes: A player must repeatedly turn on a dime and react to the shuttlecock's heart-stopping direction changes that occur so fast, they'll leave your drawers on the floor.

WE AREN'T THE WORLD

An estimated 2,000 Americans play serious badminton, but around 250,000 to 500,000 of us are at least occasional recreational players. Even that figure's a mere drop shot compared to the estimated 30 million athletes worldwide who swear by (and at) the sport. In terms of participation on a global scale, badminton is second only to soccer.

The game is in its infancy in the U.S., although there are several intense pockets of players. California leads the pack (you aren't surprised, are you?), followed by the New England states, Chicago and Miami.

The sport is so young and unfocused here that there aren't even any statistics on racquet sales, in terms of either dollars or units. That reality should change soon, however; this year the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association is conducting its first-ever badminton market survey.

FOLLOW THAT BIRD

Badminton has a clouded history, and no one can really pinpoint its birth. The game may have originated in China in the fifth century B.C., when *Ti Jian Zi*, or shuttlecock kicking, became popular.

Many believe it started a few centuries ago in India, where it was called *poona*. It bore some resemblance to lawn tennis and was eventually adopted in the 1860s by the English army officers stationed there. They, in turn, exported the game to England in the early 1870s.

TENNIS VS. BADMINTON: STATISTICS DON'T LIE

The speed and stamina required for badminton are far greater than for any other racquet sport. In the 1985 All-England [Tennis] Championships, Boris Becker defeated Kevin Curren, 6-3, 6-7, 7-6, 6-4. In the 1985 World Badminton Championships in Calgary, Canada, Han Jian of China defeated Morten Frost of Denmark, 14-18, 15-10, 15-8. The following is a statistical comparison of those matches:

	Tennis	Badminton
Time	3 hrs. 18 min.	1 hr. 16 min.
Ball/Bird in Play	18 min.	37 min.
Match Intensity*	9 percent	48 percent
Rallies	299	146
Shots	1,004	1,972
Shots Per Rally	3.4	3.5
Distance Covered	2 miles	4 miles

Note that the badminton players competed for half the time yet ran twice as far and hit nearly twice as many shots.

* The actual time the bird/ball was in flight, divided by the length of the match.

GETTING FIT FOR BADMINTON

Benny Lee, 27, is the number-one doubles player in the U.S. and a veteran of the Grand Prix circuit. You can't make a living in badminton in the U.S., he says, so he supports his playing by working in a retail sporting-goods store in San Jose, California.

To get in shape, Lee works out six days a week. He runs 4½ miles three mornings a week, and on the other three days he does interval training: sprint, walk and sprint. He runs 20 miles a week altogether.

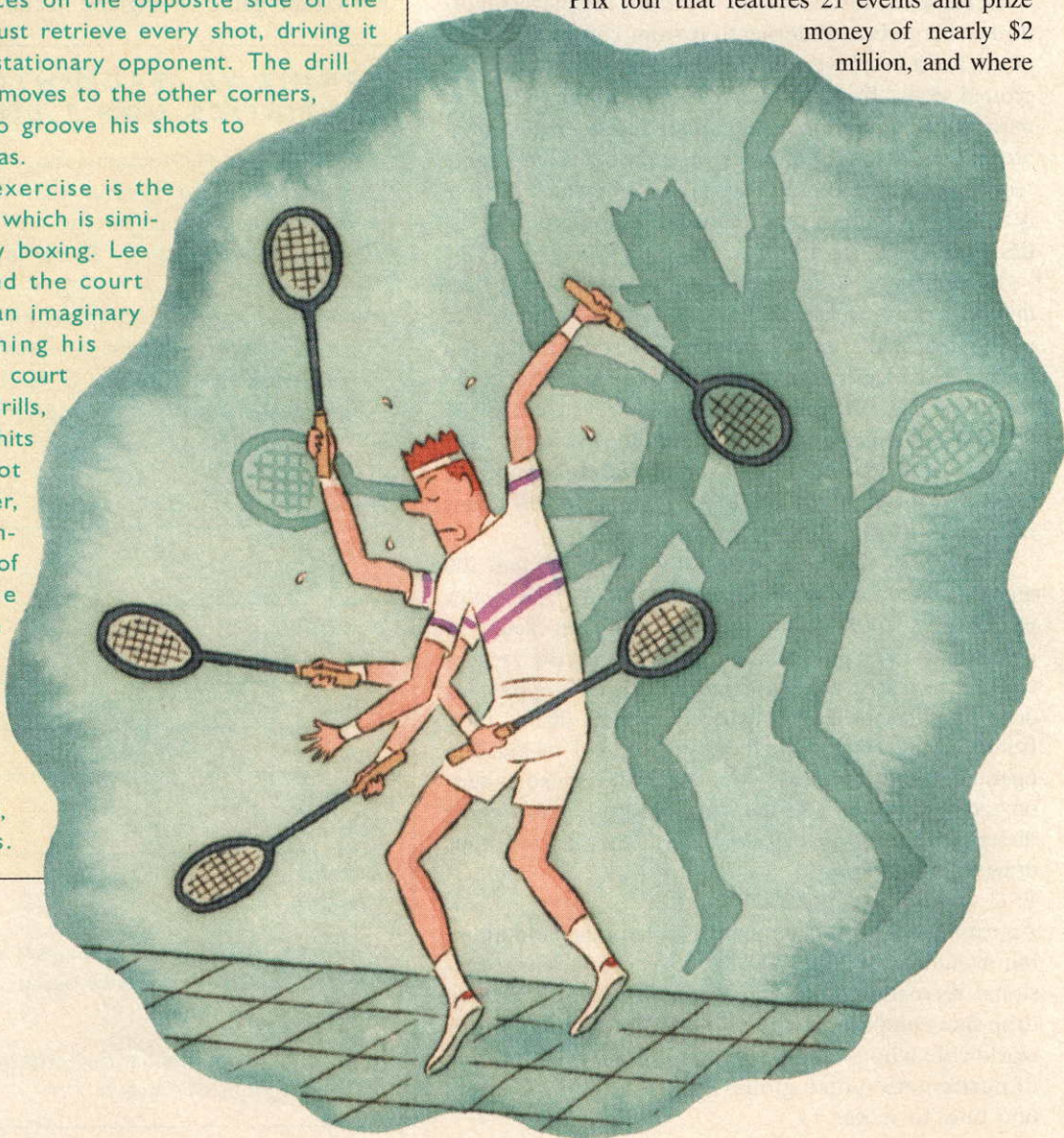
Four nights a week, Lee's on the court, drilling and competing an average of three hours a session. One drill is the point-target: His opponent will stand in a corner and hit the shuttle to different places on the opposite side of the court. Lee must retrieve every shot, driving it back to his stationary opponent. The drill partner then moves to the other corners, forcing Lee to groove his shots to these key areas.

Another exercise is the shadow drill, which is similar to shadow boxing. Lee moves around the court swinging at an imaginary shuttle, honing his footwork and court sense. Shot drills, in which he hits the same shot over and over, are also an important part of his practice regimen. Lee then supplements his play with tennis and basketball and, of course, tournaments.

The sport got its official sendoff at a party given in 1873 by the Duke of Beaufort at Badminton, his country estate in Gloucestershire. Socialites referred to this polite competition as "the game at Badminton," and the name stuck. By 1887 the game had its first organization, the Bath Badminton Club, and by 1895 it had an official governing body, the Badminton Association of England. The game even got its own All-England Championships, first held in 1899 for men. The women got their own version the following year.

The first U.S. badminton club was founded in New York in 1878. The game grew steadily and in the 1930s became a popular pastime for movie stars. Promoters saw the entertainment potential of the game and developed a professional barnstorming tour similar to that of tennis' early days, when Bill Tilden, Don Budge and, later, Jack Kramer crisscrossed the country.

Today the game is contested on a professional Grand Prix tour that features 21 events and prize money of nearly \$2 million, and where



players also earn Olympic qualifying points. National teams compete for prizes similar to tennis's Davis Cup and Federation Cup—the Thomas Cup (men) and Uber Cup (women).

Pro tournaments are divided into five levels, the toughest being a level five. To give you an idea where the U.S. stands in the world of badminton, the U.S. Open is a level-two tournament with just \$35,000 in prize money. By contrast, the five-star All-England Championships features prize money totaling \$125,000.

A BRIGHT FUTURE?

One company determined to change that standing is Japan-based Yonex, with 19 of the world's top 20 men and women players wielding its rackets. Yonex sponsors the U.S. Open and just about every other major badminton event internationally. "Our goal," says Tom Yamaguchi, Yonex's badminton sales manager, "is to make the U.S. and Canadian opens the richest and most prestigious events in the world." With Germany and the countries of the former Soviet Union behind the sport, Yamaguchi expects to see the U.S. start pushing, too.

A key to building a groundswell of support will be the emergence of a young champion who can win titles abroad. The current number-one player in the U.S., Chris Jogis, is ranked 69th in the



world. Imagine what would happen, for example, if André Agassi were to trade racquets and start smacking a shuttlecock around.

Another boost could come from simple economics. As high-priced indoor tennis court time goes begging for players, conversion to badminton would quadruple the options for paying customers—four badminton courts can fit onto one tennis court. In the best of all worlds, court time would be cheaper, too, making the game more financially accessible.

THE HE-MAN FACTOR

But before badminton can approach the popularity of other racquet sports in America, it has to lose its image as a game for wimps. The basics for wide acceptance are already in place:

MILLIONS OF AMERICANS WILL FIRST EXPERIENCE WORLD-CLASS BADMINTON DURING THE 1992 OLYMPICS IN BARCELONA.

STARTING OUT IN THE GAME

The graphite or ceramic-material racquets are 27 inches long and weigh three or four ounces. Unstrung, they cost between \$60 and \$175.

The shuttlecock, or bird, is made of 16 goose feathers and a cork tip covered with goat skin. It's between 2.5 and 2.8 inches long and weighs 0.17 to 0.19 ounces. It costs between \$1.40 and \$2 and should last two games.

Badminton is contested in the U.S. Badminton Association's (USBA) five geographical regions in juniors (12 and under, 14s, 16s and 18s); adults (19+); and seniors (35+, 50+). Over 100 national tournaments are held annually. Consult the USBA, 1750 E. Boulder, Colorado Springs, CO 80909, 719-578-4808, for contacts in your area.

- It's highly aerobic; in one game, each player will run about a mile.
- Speed, stamina and reflexes are rewarded over strength and size, making the game the Colt .45 of racquet sports. The underhanded-serve rule eliminates tennis's blast serve, which can quickly take one player out of a game and bore spectators.
- It's economical.
- It's quick; two players can blast through three games in about 45 minutes.
- Like tennis or golf, it's a sport you can play throughout your life.

Dick Squires feels that badminton is tailor-made for the nineties. "It has the four Fs," he says. "It's fast, fun, family-oriented and great for fitness." The sport got off on the wrong foot in the 1930s, Squires says, when badminton got caught in American backyards and never escaped. But now, with its Olympic exposure and sponsors' determination to build the U.S. and Canadian Opens into the world's richest events, badminton may finally be ready to fly. ■

David Lott, former executive editor of *World Tennis* magazine, is a partner in Brent, Lott & Associates, a Westport, Connecticut, marketing and communications firm.