

A History of Badminton in the United States

[from 1985 U.S. Badminton Championships program]

By Diane Moore Hales

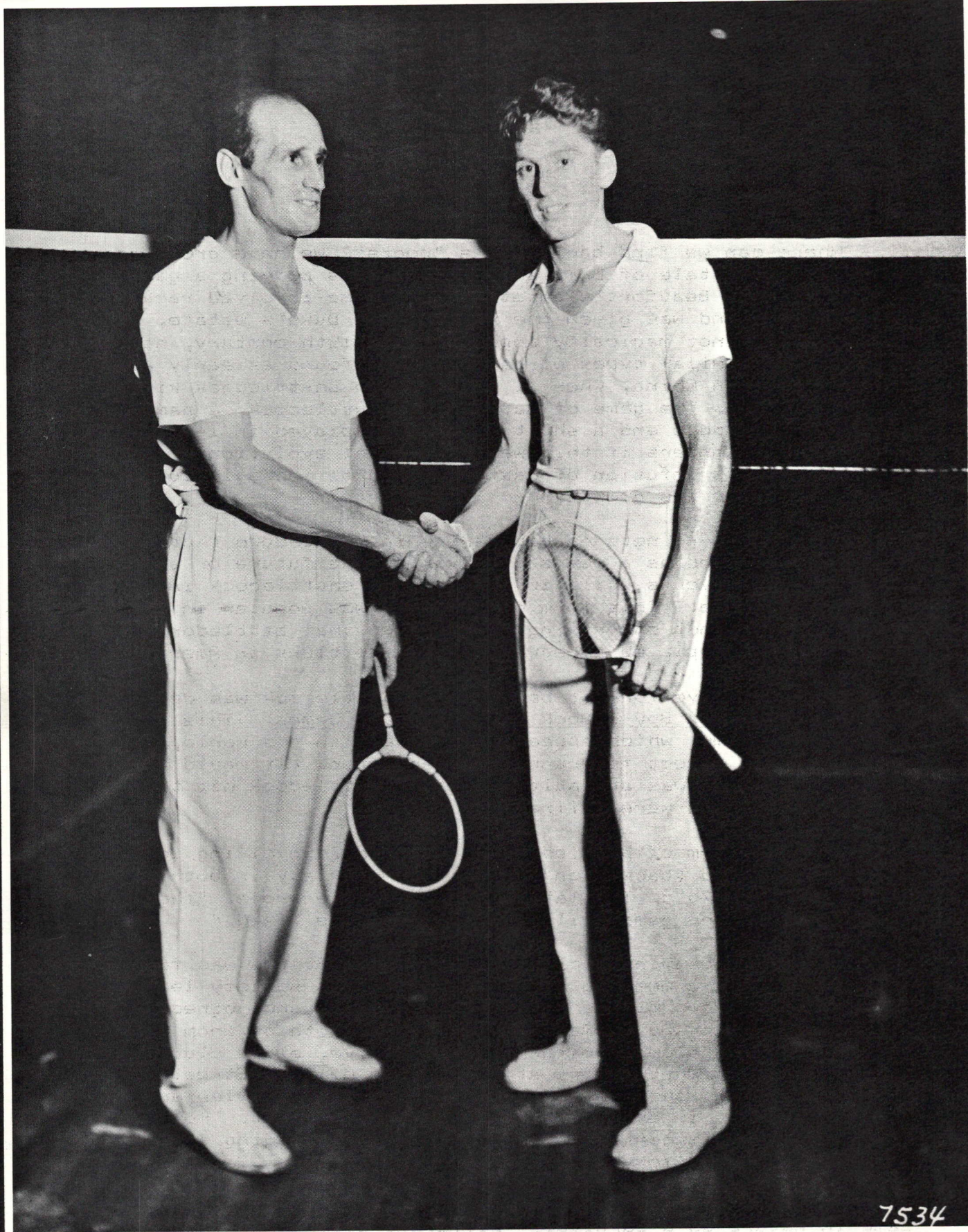
Where can we find badminton's "roots"? We have grown accustomed to hearing the tale of British Army officers playing a game in 1873 on the Duke of Beaufort's estate. This game involved rackets and shuttlecocks and was given the name of the Duke's estate, Badminton. This game did not magically appear in the 19th century. Evidence of similar types of games can be found as early as the 5th century B.C. in China when Ti Jian Zi ("shuttlecock kicking") became popular. The game of Battledore Shuttlecock, a game involving a racket or paddle and a shuttlecock, was played in 14th century England. One wonders if this was a regional evolution of a game or if Marco Polo's infusion of Eastern cultural ideas in Europe was responsible for its growth.

There were no nets or boundaries in Battledore Shuttlecock as the game was used as a means of divining the future or as a means of testing two players' skills in keeping the shuttlecock in play as long as possible. This form of the game was popular in King James I time, so it is not surprising to discover that Battledore Shuttlecock was played by early English settlers in America.

A competitive form of Battledore Shuttlecock was described in the 1864 **American Boy's Book of Sports and Games**. This competitive form of the game, which appeared elsewhere in the world, may well have been the direct forerunner of Badminton. It would be difficult to determine who was at fault when the shuttlecock hit the ground unless boundaries were defined. The new form of Battledore Shuttlecock, involving boundaries and newly called "Badminton," received notoriety in both England and India in the 1870's. The late Herbert Scheele wrote, "The actual birth date of the game will probably never be fixed."

The first badminton club in the United States was formed in 1878 and became a meeting place of New York's society leaders on weekends. Bayard Clarke returned from India and joined forces with E. Langdon Wilks and Norman R. Whitehouse, both of whom had just returned from England, to form the exclusive, elite club which met at the 71st Regiment Armory at the corner of 35th Street and Broadway. Names such as Astor, Roosevelt, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt were in evidence on the membership list. For twenty-five years after its inception, the club was the "leading social rendezvous in New York."

The weekend games of the club in its early days were much the game in nature as a carnival. Different colored shuttlecocks were used on nine courts, which were shared by 150 members in one afternoon. Pennants of red and gold, club colors, decorated the poles which supported the nets. While resting, players snacked on tea, sandwiches, and cakes.



7534

JESS WILLARD & BILL HURLEY



FABRIC - 1790
Colonial Williamsburg
(By Permission)



E. Langdon Wilks
Co-Founder Badminton
Club of New York 1878



1936 Paramount Studios
California
(From the Jess Willard
collection - Ron Deaver)

The game which was played in the early days of the club was quite a different game than we now know. Men wore tuxedos, Prince Albert coats, and dancing shoes. Women wore the long dresses which were in vogue at the time. The net varied in height from five feet six inches to six feet, making drop shots and smashes less effective. The court was hourglass shaped 28' by 20', making for a smaller area to cover and eliminating the possibility of a side-line drive, as around-the-post shots were illegal. Shuttlecocks used were often made with chicken feathers and could be "large or small, according to the wishes of the players." Rackets were heavy, wooden implements that closely resembled the tennis rackets of the time.

In the early 1900's, the people of the United States were becoming more athletically inclined and competitive, and badminton clubs were not untouched by this trend. Following a "scandal" in which Lyle Evans Mahan took off his Tuxedo coat during play, the men of the club decided that tennis clothing would be more appropriate. The rules of the English Association were adopted in 1905, and players now found themselves on a rectangular—shaped court, 44' by 20' for doubles, and 44' by 17' for singles with a net 5' high. The shuttlecock was standardized, and the new rules encouraged a new, physically demanding game.

In 1908, Dr. Richard Caines of Boston was attracted to this new form of badminton and founded the Badminton Health Club on the fourth floor of 32 Oliver Street, the second badminton club in the United States. Some 300 enthusiastic members extolled the virtues of the sport by 1925. Weight loss, muscle tone, on-the-job efficiency and lower blood pressure were given as reasons for playing.

During the depression years, an increased emphasis on recreation occurred. The workweek was shortened to spread available work among the people, thereby providing increased leisure time. Many were using this new leisure time to play badminton, and the game had become "the fastest growing sport in America." Badminton became so popular in the thirties that a New York beauty salon installed a court on its rooftop to allow its customers "to get their exercise while their hair was setting." Educational institutions, Y.M.C.A.'s, and hundreds of newly formed clubs offered badminton instruction.

Some of the interest in the 1930's was generated by professional badminton players, well-known athletes who enjoyed sport, and movie stars who played the game to keep trim. The first professionals were George "Jess" Willard, Bill Hurley, Frank Roberts, J. Frank Devlin, Jack Purcell, and Ken Davidson. Hugh Forgie followed some years later with his "Badminton on Ice" which thrilled hundreds of thousands of spectators. Scores of newspaper articles gave badminton the praise it needed to spur even more growth. The November 21, 1936, issue of the **Literary Digest** provides a typical report:

Last week, the largest gallery that has ever seen a badminton match in New York City watched two players bat a ridiculous object back and forth across a five-foot net. Stroking the bird furiously off the forehand and backhand, dribbling delicate drop shots over the net, Purcell and Davidson had the gallery constantly agog.

Fanchon and Marco, top stage promoters in the country in the 1330's, signed Jess Willard and Bill Hurley in 1936 to perform a series of badminton exhibitions in movie houses. It was common to see vaudeville and other stage acts offered with a motion picture in this era. They played at the following theaters: Paramount in Los Angeles, Roxy in New York, Hippodrome in Baltimore, Stanley in Pittsburgh, Met in Boston, Fox in Detroit, Palace in Cleveland, and the Chicago Theatre. Other performances were in Chicago at the Gold Coast Room of the Drake Hotel and the 1937 Ford V-8 Spring Frolics. The typical reaction to the performances can be seen in a letter written by Harry Wallen, the managing director of Paramount Theatre, in April of 1936:

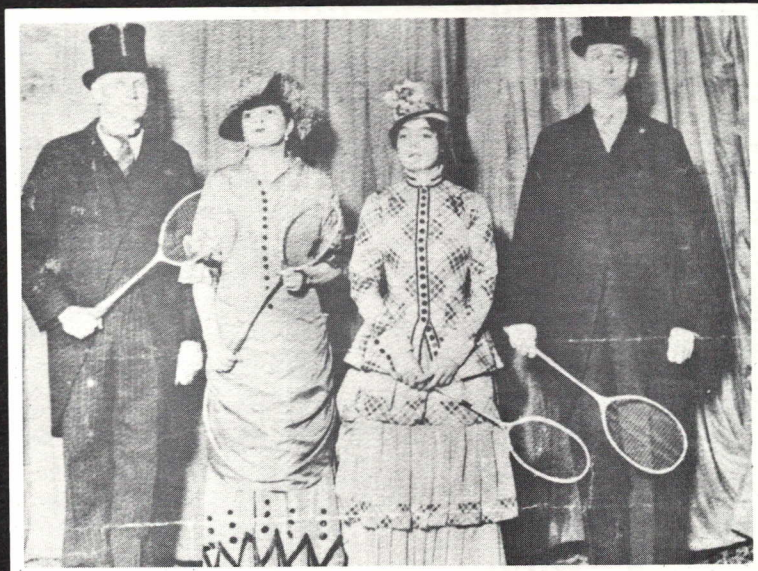
I thought that you would like to know that we feel an Innovation in the Entertainment Field had been accomplished. To think that in a 3400 seat deluxe motion picture theatre, a rapidly growing sport would so hold the interest of patrons that not a single person left their seat during the Badminton Game—a period of some ten to twelve minutes—at neither of the four or five shows daily—This is something that only the “high spots” of the feature picture itself accomplishes!

Top athletes in other sports began using badminton as a conditioner in the 1930's. Davis Cup player Sidney Wood, tennis star Hazel Wightman, Chicago Cubs slugger Larry French, Freddie Hutchison, the darling of the Seattle Rainiers baseball team, U.S.C. football coach Howard Jones, and Stanford football star Ernie Nevers all played vigorous games.

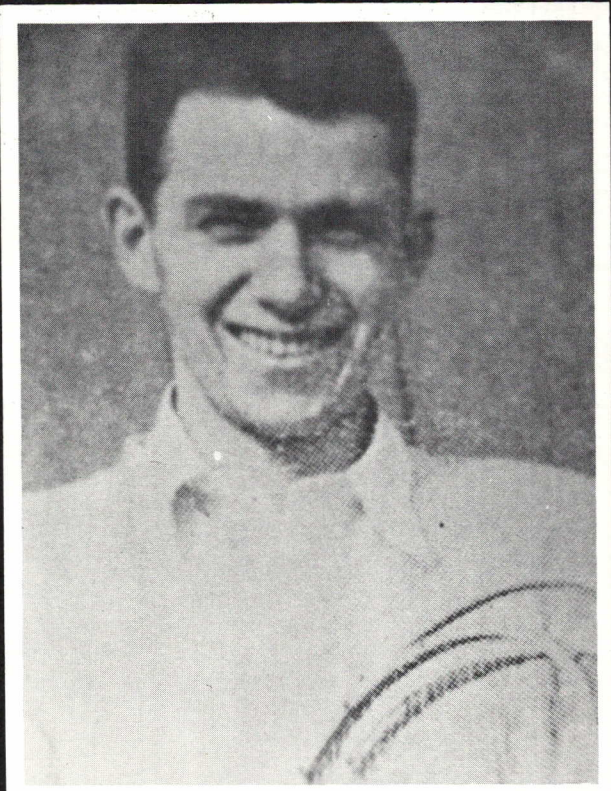
Badminton became popular in Hollywood in the 1930's. Warner Bros. produced a short instructional film, and Walt Disney visited the Pasadena Badminton Club to watch tournaments. Hollywood personalities who played were Sonja Henie, James Cagney, Pat O'Brien, Harold Lloyd, Claudette Colbert, Bette Davis, Loretta Young, Boris Karloff, Andy Devine, Dick Powell, Ginger Rogers and Johnny Weissmuller. Some forty-eight other famous stars played the game outdoors, though several also practiced in gymnasiums. Joan Crawford was so addicted to the game that she would go outside and play in a bathing suit on rainy days. Douglas Fairbanks designed slightly different equipment for windy days and called this modified game "Doug."

The tremendous growth of the sport of badminton in the 1930's led some to feel the establishment of a national organization was in order. The leaders of the unification movement were the twins, Donald and Philip Richardson, Donald Wilbur, and Robert McMillan. These four were fraternity brothers in Brookline, Massachusetts, in their younger days. Donald Wilbur, first president of the American Badminton Association, wrote:

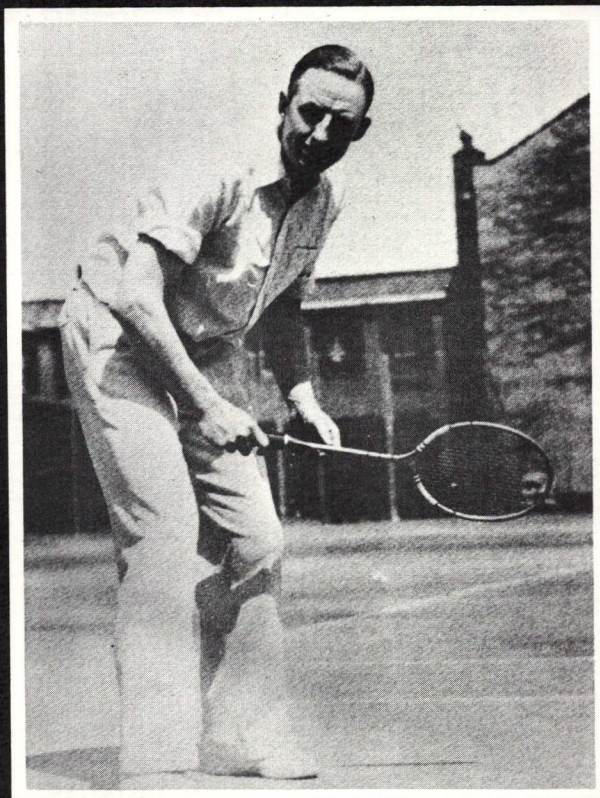
The American Badminton Association was not started primarily for the purpose of running National competitions, but rather, to gather the various regional groups together to form a united front for the game. There were at that time various groups in



ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BADMINTON CLUB OF NEW YORK (1928) MRS. REGINALD WIGHAM & MISS ALOISE BOKER (DONOR OF THE PERPETUAL TROPHY FOR LADIES SINGLE IN NATIONALS) WITH FREDRICK ASHTON DePEYSTER AND WALTER RYSAM JONES. THEY ARE WEARING THE COURT ATTIRE USED IN THE CLUB IN THE 19th CENTURY. THE RACQUETS ARE "MODERN", HOWEVER, AS THE RACQUETS OF THE 19th CENTURY WERE HEAVIER.



WALTER KRAMER
1st U. S. SINGLES CHAMP



JACK PURCELL
1930'S



ZOE SMITH DEL BARKHUFF DICK YEAGER HAMILTON LAW
1st WD U. S. Champs: Smith & Bakhuff
2nd MD U. S. CHAMPS: Yeager & Law
1st XD U. S. Champs: Barkhuff & Law
1st Triple crown winner in U. S. Nationals: Del Barkhuff



HOLLYWOOD STARS with JESS WILLARD 1930'S
(Dick Powell and Mary Buen among them)

New York, in Massachusetts, in Chicago, and on the West Coast, each with their own plans and programs. It was felt that there should be one voice to talk with the Canadian Association, with the advertisers of equipment, and for public relations purposes. After this was completed, with a Board of Directors representing these various areas, we decided to arrange a National Competition.

The records of the first A.B.A. meetings are lost, but discussions were held concerning rules, amateur status, membership, publicity, and tournaments. One task undertaken by the directors was to create a national championship. Chicago area players offered to host this tournament April 1st through 3rd in 1937, at the Naval Reserve Armory. Tournament headquarters was at the posh Palmer House Hotel. Five thousand socialites watched the final rounds described as follows in the May 1937, issue of the **Canadian Lawn Tennis and Badminton Magazine**:

The boxes and front rows of seats surrounding the center court filled with beautifully gowned women in evening dress with escorts attired in white ties and tails. Back of this circle rose tier on tier of enthusiastic supporters forming the largest audience ever to watch a badminton display on the continent. The swimming pool was turned into a nightclub for this occasion and was decorated with streamers and varicolored lights. On one side was erected a long bar or counter where a large choice of salads and meats were temptingly displayed. Musicians wandered between the tables playing popular selections.

Del Barkhuff (now Cunningham) of Seattle became the first person ever to win the national triple crown in badminton in the U.S. Her effective "skyrocket" serve helped her to defeat Wanda Bergman of New York 11-4, 11-1 in the final round. She then returned to the court and partnered Zoe Smith to win the ladies doubles title in an exciting three-game match against Bergman and Helen Gibson. Mrs. Barkhuff partnered Hamilton Law in mixed doubles to win a see-saw battle over Walter Kramer and Mrs. Casey, 13-18, 15-8, 15-0.

The finals of the first men's singles championship found Walter Kramer of Detroit facing Hok Sim Ong, originally from Malaya. Kramer won the first game 15-10 and was down 1-4 in the second, when he suddenly ran out fourteen straight points to become the first US "king" of badminton. The men's doubles final found Donald and Philip Richardson of Boston facing the aggressive team of Chester Goss and Don Eversoll of California. The Californians' offense proved a bit much for the Bostonians, and the final score was 15-11, 15-3.

World War II put an abrupt halt to the tremendous growth seen in the sport in the 1930's. Many key organizers and players became involved in the war effort and no longer had time or the means to devote to the game. Many armories closed their facilities to recreational use, and this in turn shut down many clubs. Blackouts along the west coast made night-time play impossible.

One of the most accomplished players the United States has ever produced appeared on the scene just prior to the war. In 1939, a new face from Pasadena, California, appeared at the national championships and surprised everyone when he won the men's singles title. The victor, David Freeman, possessed remarkable athletic talent. L. Winchester Jones, Pasadena Club tournament organizer, told of one weekend in which Freeman played in table tennis, tennis, and badminton tournaments and won all three! Having won the national junior tennis title, Mr. Freeman opted to continue playing badminton at the competitive level. He won countless titles, including the prestigious All-England Championship before hanging up his rackets to pursue a medical career.

Thelma Scovil Welcome and Janet Wright dominated women's doubles in the late 1940's while the spunky left-handed dynamo from New York, Ethel Marshall, went on to win seven singles titles. Clint and Patsy Stevens proved that some of the best mixed doubles in the world was played on our shores when they brought home the 1949 All-England title. Wynn Rogers thrilled audiences with his relentless attack and careful control as he won five national mixed doubles titles with Loma Smith, Virginia Mosdale, and Helen Tibbetts in the same era.

The 1950's continued with a tradition of excellence in U.S. badminton. The 1952 Thomas Cup Team, composed of Joe Alston, Wynn Rogers, Carl Loveday, Martin Mendez, Dick Mitchell, and Bobby Williams became the second-best in the world when they lost to Malaya 7-2.

Wynn Rogers and Joe Alston were considered to be two of the best doubles players in the world; and, indeed, Joe's 1957 All-England doubles victory with pick-up partner, John Heah of Malaya, would indicate such was the case. Following this feat, **Sports Illustrated** honored Joe by putting him on the cover. Joe's singles and mixed doubles wins are impressive, too. In 1955, he defeated Eddy Choong to win the U.S. Open Singles Championship; and in 1953 and 1954, he won the national mixed doubles title with his wife, Lois, who possessed one of the finest defenses ever seen by an American female player.

The best women in the world were from the United States in the 1950's. Margaret Varner and Judy Devlin dominated the All-England singles titles, and each also won All-England doubles titles. Both players were on the first U.S. Uber Cup team, which defeated India 7-0, Canada 7-0, and Denmark 6-1. Other members of this 1956-7 team were Ethel Marshall, Bea Massman, Lois Alston,

and Judy's steady, aggressive doubles partner, sister Susan. Connie Davidson coached this world-championship team.

Varner, the Devlins, and Alston returned to play on the 1959-60 team, but two new faces were seen. Dottie O' Neil from Connecticut, a surprise finalist in the 1958 singles championship, and Beulah Bymaster, a strong competitor from Glendale, California, participated in the 1960 competition. The U.S. Uber Cup Team again proved to be number one in the world with a 5-2 victory over Denmark in Philadelphia.

The American men did not fare quite as well. The 1954-5 team, composed of the same players as the 1952 team except for Manuel Armendariz replacing the retired Martin Mendez, defeated Canada 9-0, but then lost to India 6-3.

Some of the excellence of the 1950's carried over to the 1960's. Judy Devlin Hashman retired from competitive singles play in 1967 with her twelfth All-England singles title. It is doubtful that anyone will ever equal the record of this extremely deceptive, determined, precise, intense competitor. Her five victories in the All-England double's competition with her sister, Susan, is a much-admired record also. Susan writes that the accuracy of their strokes came from "never-ending practice of the various strokes." She states that the mental toughness came from "concentration, the will to win, and determination." She added that one of Judy's favorite sayings as a little girl was, "Me first!"

The U.S. won its most recent Uber Cup title in 1963 over the English team in an exciting, closely contested match. MacGregor Stewart, Carlene Starkey, and the 16-year-old junior team of Tyna Barinaga and Caroline Jensen all were new to the international scene. With the match score at 3-all, Hashman and Starkey faced Rogers and Pritchard in the final game. The U.S. won the first game 15-8, lost the second by the same score, and were down 8-2 in the third when Carlene suddenly made several amazing put-aways at net. The final score was 15-8, and the U.S. managed to retain the cup.

In the 1950's and 1960's, quite a few junior groups were functioning. Interested parents and supporters were Naomi Bender of Wilmington, Lynn Stockton of Flint, the Muthigs and Pritulas of Detroit, J. Frank Devlin of Baltimore, Pat Cornell of Philadelphia, Ned Vallerand of Alhambra (CA), Vern Burton of Port Angeles (WA), the Pajareses of Burbank, the Venings and several other families from Manhattan Beach. They and others put in many hours developing young players. Graduates from these Junior programs went on to win national titles, while others quit, citing reasons as the lack of facilities, opponents, and money during their college years. Today, active junior groups are few, though more schools have badminton programs than were evident in the 1960's.

The 1960's produced some new faces. James Poole, the tall, crafty tactician who had played on U.S. basketball teams, remains a highly respected player for

his impressive victories over foreign players in singles. The 1958 and 1961 U.S. Open men's singles champion partnered Donald Paup, the master of shot placement and the backhand serve, to win numerous national doubles titles. Tyna Barinaga and Caroline Jensen became two of the few to win junior and adult amateur titles in the same year.

The 1970's saw the introduction of lighter metal rackets and the combination of a decline in the number of clubs nation-wide along with an expansion in high school and collegiate play. The first women's DGWS National Collegiate Championships were held at Tulane University in the Spring of 1970. Judy Brodhun and Hester Hill represented Washington, while Judianne Kelly and Karen Barr led the contingent from California State University, Long Beach. Nancy Bender was another top contender from the East and represented Cal Poly Pomona. Cal Poly won the singles, while Washington was the victor in doubles.

1971 found my husband Stan and me both winning in Las Vegas for the first-time. He defeated Chris Kinard in the semi-finals and Charles Coakley in the finals to successfully defend his national singles title. I played the junior champion, Pam Stockton, and was fortunate to overcome her powerful round-the-head and deadly forehand cut drop shot in what was to be a close victory, 12-11 in the third game in the finals. These championships were propitious for the youngsters as Pam went on to become a dominant figure in the women's events from that tournament to the present time. Chris Kinard won more singles titles in the 1970's than any other male. Charles Coakley was ranked in the top ten in singles and doubles for several years. Judianne Kelly, a dynamic well-rounded player who has been seen in many national finals in the past ten years, and Michael Walker, former national singles champion, have dominated the mixed doubles competition in recent years, though they have been hard pressed by John Britton and Cheryl Carton, Pam and Dan Brady, and most recently, Matt Fogarty and Mary Fran Hughes. Gary Higgins has several national singles titles to his name and teamed with John Britton to win several impressive doubles championships. Cheryl Carton, a player who emerged from the high school program in San Diego, has relied on her fleetness of foot and accurate shot placements to win five national singles titles.

It is refreshing to see new faces such as Joy Kitzmiller, Regina Rubin, Mary Fran Hughes, Rodney Barton, Chris Jogis, and Benny Lee in the finals of some of the prestigious tournaments. Yet with dwindling funds in college and high school programs, fewer clubs, and even fewer junior programs, one sees the need for a resurgence of the "badminton fever" of the 1930's. Perhaps, the impending entrance of badminton into the Olympics will provide a spark for revival.

[edited by Bob Cook and Maryann Bowles—Feb 2022]