

# Sports Illustrated

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## IRRESISTIBLE OKLAHOMA MEETS IMMOVABLE NEBRASKA



## What kind of racket is this?

Swatting shuttlecocks may not be the toughest of sporting pastimes, but it was superb conditioning that carried two Texans to their titles

An odd game, the badminton we played as kids, a game of maddening and subtle charms: the satisfying ping of a rare good shot vibrating through the little racket, then the bird rising slowly in a high, tempting arc, and whiff, where did it go? Somehow it had a way of dying in flight, of plummeting to the lumpy lawn as if shot, while the player went crashing into the net. Outdoors, with the feathery bird in the breeze, playing badminton was like trying to spear butterflies with a salad fork. None of us ever became really good players.

There are plainly a number of them in this country in 1971. Two weeks ago,

for example, The Houston Badminton Tournament was an all-too-pallid name for what went on in the Fondé Recreation Center. The competition, drawing primarily from the Southwest, may not have been world class, but the play bore little resemblance to the back-lawn variety and the surroundings would certainly have been a revelation to the game's outdoor practitioners. Play at Houston's indoor badminton courts had hardly begun when a player sneered and gestured toward the ceiling. His birds were flipping over on high serves, he complained, so they turned the air conditioner from low to off, which indirectly

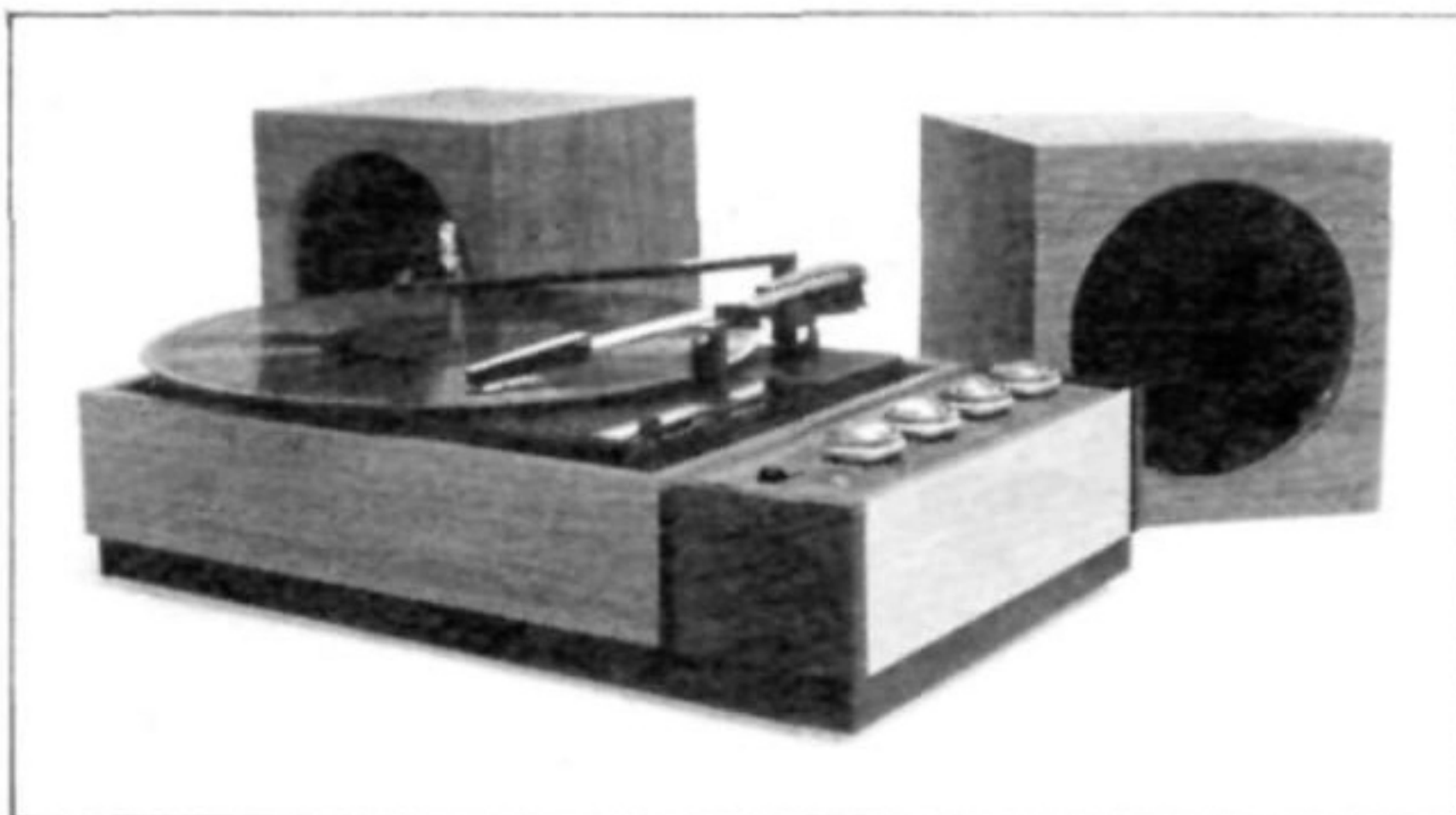
said it all about the outdoor game familiar to most Americans. Indoor courts cost money, though, and the shortage of such facilities has stuck the sport in this country with an unwanted reputation for being strictly backyard. "Six hundred millionaires in Houston, and not one of them a badminton player," a white-haired entrant complained.

The man was tournament chairman, and his name was Sheldon (Sandy) McIntosh. He had a rosy Colonel Sanders face, was entered in doubles competition and, "kissing 70," as he put it, was the oldest tournament player in the country. He kept saying things like, "People always thought badminton was a sissy game, but it's tougher than tennis. We've got no time to recuperate after a shot." And thinking of it, one realizes that badminton is the only racket sport in which the ball (or bird) does not bounce between strokes. McIntosh offered other more personal insights: "When my time comes it'll come," he said. "It may be in bed or it may be on the court." His

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time, it appears, has threatened to come pretty frequently. In 1929 a thug put a .38 slug through his badminton shoulder. Thirteen years later he broke his back. In 1957 a horse fell on him and fractured his shoulder in three places—the badminton shoulder again. Two years later a reckless driver struck his car, fracturing his skull and breaking half his ribs; he spent 12 days unconscious, 30 more in bed. Then, six months ago, McIntosh felt a terrible pain in his back. He knew it was a heart attack, but he wouldn't sit down. "My philosophy," he says, "is to fight like the devil." He didn't bother seeing a doctor, and next day he went to the gym, had a workout and another attack. Still no doctor. A few days passed, then "pain everywhere," he recalls, so he took a glass of brandy and felt fine. A week later, though, on Mother's Day, with his fourth coronary in three weeks, he gave in and spent 40 hours in an oxygen tent. Now, in November, he was on the court again. Badminton players

are tough, it seems, like their sport. Another doubles entry at Houston was Donald Kerr of New Orleans, at 59 a long way from being the country's oldest badminton player, but certainly the only one with a wooden leg. Kerr is director of The National Institute of Amputee Rehabilitation, a kind of work he began with returning veterans during World War II. He lost his own leg at eight, but decided to be an athlete soon afterward, and he says that by high school he was high-jumping six feet and running the high hurdles. At Tulane University he made the boxing team and later turned semipro, fighting some 75 times without a loss between 1932 and 1951. For 35 years Kerr has coached and played badminton, and until he tore his right knee apart running 100-yard dashes he would wind up his matches by leaping over the five-foot net. At Houston he said, "I'm primarily interested in a person going home and saying to his kid, 'Hey, get off your fanny, I just saw a guy. . . .'"

The man does impress people. No player traveled farther to Houston than a 26-year-old Kerr admirer named John Jaymont. A first lieutenant at Virginia's Fort Belvoir army base, Jaymont had played badminton growing up in Baltimore, and in September of 1970 he had begun practicing again at a Washington, D.C. gym where, he recalls, "This old man walked in with a wooden leg and a couple of drinks under his belt and he wanted to play badminton. No problem, I thought, but after one game I realized I hadn't been doing anything right. He corrected my footwork, my backhand—everything." A month later Jaymont won the badminton championship of Maryland.

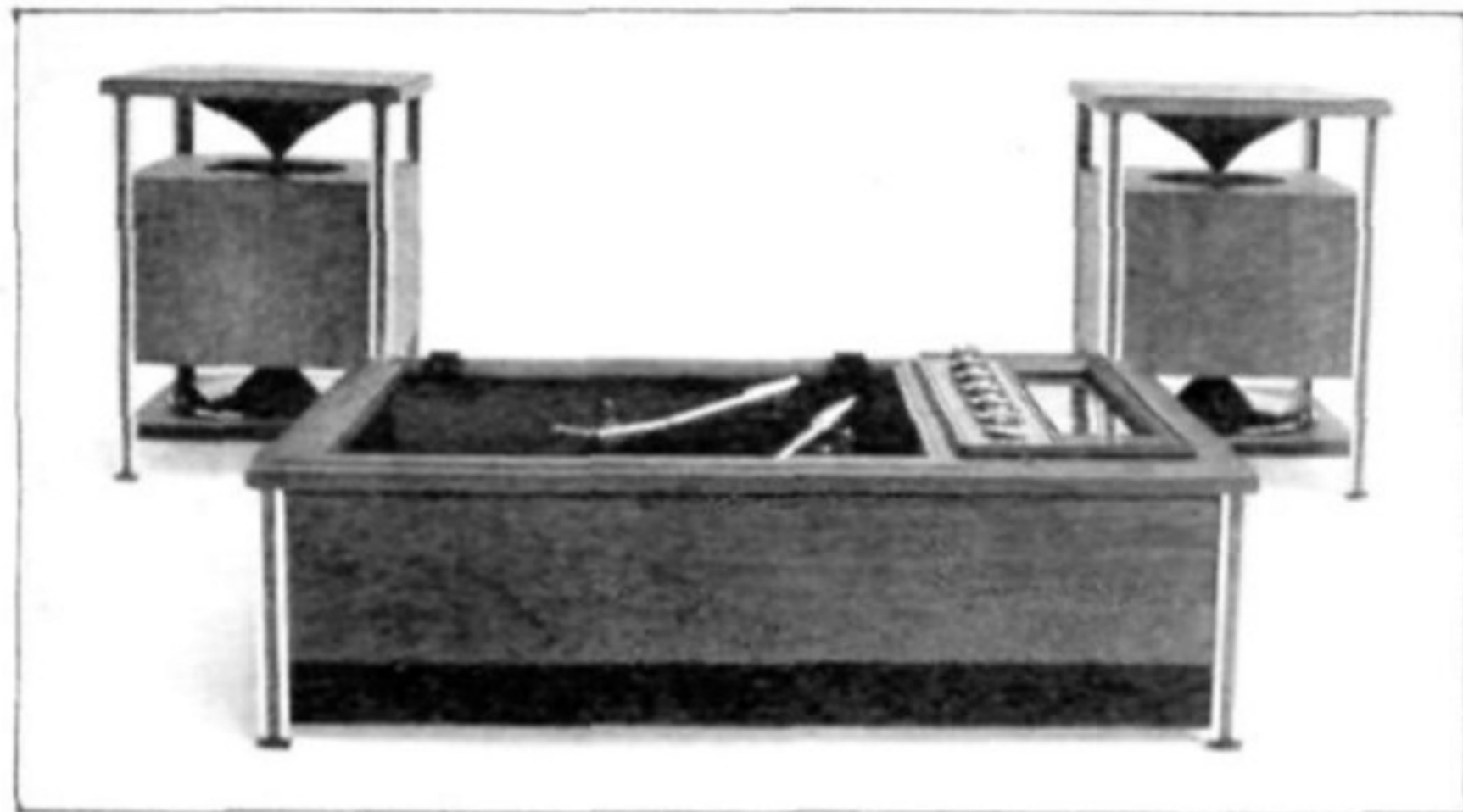
Jaymont's semifinal match at Houston was against the Texas champion, a more experienced 29-year-old named Ted Egerton who that morning had said, "Played right, a game of singles can be murder," and theirs was a classic badminton match, perhaps the tournament's best. A tennis court is 78

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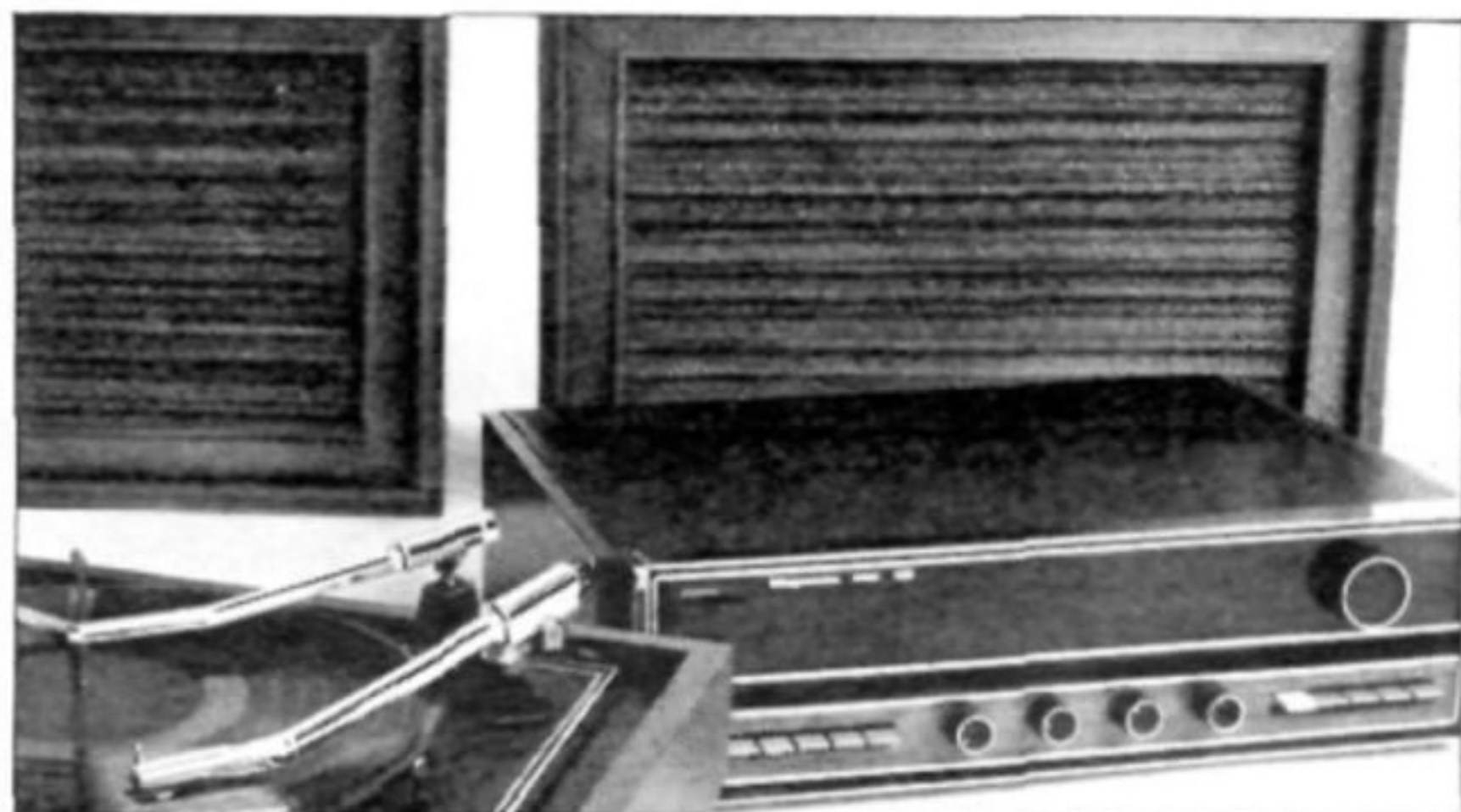
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feet long, a badminton court only 44, and, as the bird never touches the floor, the volleys can be blistering. Jaymont and Egerton made the bird look like popping corn. One volley in their second game lasted 14 shots, eight of them in four seconds, and the 14th hit the net and dribbled over. Jaymont was four feet away, helpless to reach it. His legs were going, and Egerton took the set. He had swept through his quarterfinal match in two quick games, while Jaymont had gone three long ones. "My strategy," said Egerton, "was to keep him on the run." Jaymont had played touch football hours every day for months, but five 12-minute badminton games are truly something else. (A former Chicago Bears back named Peter Johnson would agree. "I used to think badminton was an absurd sport," he says. "It took a friend a year to get me to try it, but you have to be in three or four times the condition for badminton than for football. A two-platoon man plays only seven or eight minutes each game.")

Of course there are two ways of looking at it. "Anyone can learn badminton," said Margot ter Metz, 23, a former Dutch champion now living in Texas. "You can play on all levels of ability, but tennis, for instance, is not so easy to start." One can see how two old ladies could volley a bird, high and slowly, but fail miserably with a heavier tennis ball and racket.

Before the tournament began, people spoke of the women's singles competition as if it came in two sections: ter Metz and all the rest. Until Houston, Margot had lost only once during two years in the U.S., but she also had not practiced between matches, or bothered to stay in shape; the tournament's biggest upset—its only one, really—was ter Metz' loss to a rangy Texan wearing a sailor cap named Susan Torrance, the state collegiate champion and No. 1 in women's tennis at the University of Texas. Her secret must be radar, since even indoors she never doffed her sailor cap—worn low—and ter Metz' serves were very high and hard to hit. "The best serves I've ever seen," Torrance admitted. "But I made her play defensive badminton, hitting to her backhand, so she couldn't smash to mine." Susan Torrance did not say so, but a summer of tennis in her legs did not do her any harm.

The best badminton at Houston was

played by men, though. The final of the men's singles, Ted Egerton against Dale Miller, an oil engineer from Ponca City, Okla., was a dramatic display of badminton's two imperatives, conditioning and precise shot control. Egerton had the first, Miller the second. For most of the opening game, Miller hit while Egerton ran, but after 10 minutes it was Miller who exclaimed, "Boy, isn't it the first quarter yet?" And, though he hung on to win 15-6, Egerton took game two by the same score. Miller seemed beaten at this point, but using every trick he knew he drew even at 9-9 in the deciding game. Then, caught flat-footed, he let an easy one drop. "That's the turning point," someone whispered, and quickly it was 10-, 11-, 12-9 Egerton. He won 15-10. Miller towed himself off, and there was a palpable release of tension in the crowd.

For sheer tension-free entertainment an early men's doubles match should have won some kind of prize. Young John Jaymont and his veddy British mustache, and Donald Kerr, with an endless variety of grimaces when he missed a shot, played Sandy McIntosh—legs taped "to keep my knees from falling apart"—and Ed Stuart, the lanky, austere-looking mayor of Friendswood, Texas. Kerr and Jaymont won, McIntosh sputtered, and then laughed (after all, his time had not come).

That evening everyone was enthusiastic about a badminton exhibition to be played at Munich next year, for the first time at an Olympics; some predicted a new Olympic sport for 1976. But the big news concerned the Red Chinese team, which had arrived in Canada to begin a series of exhibitions. No one cared about the politics involved, it was simply a chance to save badminton. The situation, it seems, has been grave for the sport. Sadly, we appear to be running out of birds, or good ones, or at least good feathers. There are 16 feathers in each bird, and it takes a whole goose to get the proper 16. But most of the suitable geese come from Red China, and now, well, maybe the bird crisis could be brought before the U.N. All agreed that would be the biggest event since 1873, when some Englishmen brought an odd game called Poona home from India and began playing it at the Duke of Beaufort's country estate, a place called Badminton. **END**