

In search of our old friend the volley, still the purest form of attack in tennis

Classic stroke all but gone, says Iain Boyd

WE'D sit up and take notice if players emerged in the flamboyant attire that characterised them the rest of the year. "The thing Wimbledon has done so well over the years is maintain their traditions," confirms Wimbledon commentator Wally Masur, "So the fact it's all whites and no advertising hoardings really adds to the mystique of the event." In an era where change is expected, this non-conformist attitude is a refreshing change. But what has happened to the volley we used to know and love?

Not the drive volley or "groundstroke that doesn't bounce" as it should be called. Or the high "my gran could put that away" volley that we see so often as players reluctantly venture forwards, when they'd rather send gran to do the job. What has become of the "real" volley – the low volley, the waist high volley, the serve and volley?

Serve and volley, and volleying in general, represent the ultimate form of attacking tennis and, in sport, attack is what exhilarates. Lionel Messi dribbling at baffled defences; the late great Seve Ballesteros attacking the pin when he should have gone for the heart of the green showed a man with the heart of a lion and who won the hearts of millions. Few had the sporting skills to try such trickery. Volleying, difficult due to the feel required in the hands, is such a skill rarely mastered. And it is a skill we associate with Wimbledon itself.

As Sampras and McEnroe steamed in after first and second serve, we knew the end was nigh, one way or the other. This quick rush is what gets us on the edge of our seats and into our seats in the first place. This talent made fans realise "well I simply couldn't do that" while inspiring them to try. So why has it vanished?

"They changed the court seed so it's all rye now rather than the old blend," says Masur of the hallowed Wimbledon turf. "They're much harder now, bounce higher, and these days the guys are so good from the back of court it makes it really hard to go to the net, let alone on a higher, slower court." Masur refers to the little known moment in tennis history when, in 2001, Wimbledon replaced the low, skidding turf that had served volleying legends Laver, McEnroe and co so admirably.

As the fastest and most important court of the year was slowed, the volley's death certificate on tour was effectively signed. Ten years on, and the ripple effect has re-shaped the game of the most naturally gifted tennis players – leaving fans with a sense of yearning.

Is this an over-dramatisation of events? Perhaps, but few tournaments commanded the respect of Wimbledon. This unique event, on an alien surface to most, stood out on the tennis calendar as the one players most feared and revered. And, wanting the title more than

any other, they adjusted their games accordingly. Or, at least, they used to.

Former champion Pete Sampras famously switched from a perfectly working double-handed backhand as a teenager to a freer, single hander allowing more reach on the slick surface. Coupled with the required serve and volley game, he reigned supreme seven times. And his net rushing game, vital for Wimbledon success, was equally relevant the rest of the year. After all, he won five US and two Australian Opens on medium-paced hard courts too. But now? "Guys don't volley on any surface anymore really," muses former Wimbledon mixed doubles champion Jamie Murray. "The game's changed so much. Generally it's the same stuff – guys hitting from the baseline."

So if that's what works now, what's the problem? After all, recent Wimbledon finals between Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer produced five set thrillers that matched anything Borg v McEnroe had to offer years earlier. But, pre-2001, early round losses for top-seeded clay experts were commonplace and added to the intrigue at Wimbledon. Former world No 1 and three-time French Open winner Gustavo Kuerten against a big

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serve-volleying journeyman was a no brainer, but it'd be Kuerten racking his brains afterwards. First-round losses in 1997 and 1998 to such opponents, Justin Gimelstob and Jason Stoltenberg respectively, had the Brazilian baseliner baffled. Like a windy Open championship at Muirfield where an 80 was a respectable score, this was the unique challenge in the year that had players sitting up and taking notes.

"The courts slowing definitely changed things on tour," continues Murray. "However balls are slower now, technology in rackets and strings gives players so much more power, and the guys are so much fitter and faster so you just don't see guys coming to the net anymore. It's not something they really practise." As he speaks you sense this talented serve and volleyer wishes he was playing his trade back in the day. "It is a shame because great volleying is what you used to associate with something like Wimbledon," he adds.

And it's these other factors that realistically forced Wimbledon's formerly non-conformist hand. The racket and string manufacturers were rightly developing new ways to improve per-



Tennis legend John McEnroe was one of the greatest exponents of the serve-and-volley game on grass Picture: Getty Images

formance for players. This meant faster shots and shorter points. Meanwhile, the ITF and Wimbledon were trying to slow it down, in the main it seems, for television. In 2002 the ITF changed the rules of tennis, allowing three different speeds of ball including a slower option (the ball being eight per cent larger) for grass courts. This shift, coupled with the pure rye grass, gives us the baseline game Wimbledon that we see today.

Given this new landscape, is the art of volleying simply fading into the sunset? "In the last 12 months we've seen guys sneaking, or ghosting in a lot more, but it's more of a surprise tactic against out and out baseliners," says British Davis Cup captain Leon Smith. "It's not really clear why it's happened but for me it's pleasing. I don't think there is a better sight in the game than someone like Federer going forward."

Further signs of life were on display this year at Queen's Club, where net rushers Andy Roddick and Feliciano Lopez played out a serve and volley feast for thrilled fans. How did this

happen? Well, simply, the grass there remains unchanged and similar to the "old" Wimbledon. Andy Roddick's name on the trophy four times from 2003 emphasises the point. The key fact remains, if the grass is fast then volleying would again be king regardless of other factors. But there might be no turning the tide. "We train our guys on

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All England Club spokesperson

clay a lot more now," continues Smith. "It's groundstrokes that are dominating on tour these days so we need to make this our priority." An All England Club spokesperson confirms: "We don't have any plans to speed up the courts. We are happy with how the courts play, so don't see a need to change them." With

coaching practice seemingly adjusting to the shifting goalposts, it looks like future generations may simply not require the volleying tools of old.

No one could argue that Wimbledon is not still a challenge. Bounces can be irregular, movement is tricky and a player constructing a rally with the aim of ending it with a high volley will still dominate, yet its uniqueness is fading.

Completing the Grand Slam was once a challenge due to the difficulty of mastering those polar opposites of clay and grass, however only the strength of opposition in this golden era now renders the slam a major hurdle. Federer winning the French and Nadal winning Wimbledon are cases in point.

With the French courts unchanged, this speaks volumes for the shift in the game that started when Wimbledon changed. "It's a bit disappointing," agrees Masur, "I would like to think you could still serve and volley your way to a Wimbledon title".

● Iain Boyd is a former tennis player who now coaches in Australia.