

The Foundations of Tennis

The foundation of tennis is like most foundations of things; it's a bit of a mystery and has a lot of theories and controversies. One of the versions of the origin of tennis brings us back to the Stone Age people hitting rocks backward and forward possibly with clubs. A more far-reaching origin of tennis is derived from handball, an adaptation of which was played in the ancient civilizations of Rome, Greece, and Egypt. It is believed that the basis of the name 'tennis' came from an Egyptian town on the Nile called Tinnis and the word 'racquet' is taken from the word 'rahat' which means palm, both of which are Arabic words.

Another theory on the origin of tennis claims that the French invented the game, around the 11th or 12th century, and that the word tennis is derived from the French word 'tenez' which means 'take it' or 'play.' Legend has it that the game was bestowed to French Royal Court in the 10th century by a wandering minstrel, but by the 11th century early tennis was played by French monks.

The monks played the game by hitting the ball against the monastery walls and occasionally even over a rope strung across a courtyard. Hands were used to hit the ball in the beginning which is why it was initially called jeu de paume (game of hand); then later on gloves were used and eventually players started to use short bats which evolved into the modern day racquet.

Louis IV and the Catholic Church both attempted to ban the game in France due to the popularity the game had gained, where about 1800 courts were built, but they failed. By the 14th century, tennis spread to England where both Henry VII and Henry VIII became avid players of the game initiating construction of courts across the country.

By 1500 the tennis racquet was no longer made entirely of wood but consisted of a wooden handle with a sheep gut strung head. In 1850, Charles Goodyear discovered vulcanization which resulted in bouncier balls for tennis. In 1858, Major T.H. Gem and J.B. Perara invented an outdoor version of tennis which was adapted for play on grass, and in 1873, Major Walter Wingfield adapted a newer version of tennis using modified rules and equipment which he patented under the name "Sphairistike." He is known to be the father of modern day tennis.

The old game of tennis still called jeu de paume in France was overshadowed by the new found dominance of the lawn adaptation. Tennis is now called real tennis or royal tennis in Britain to distinguish it from lawn tennis, and in the United States it is known as court tennis.