
From Amateurism to Open Tennis

by
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In December, 1967, one of the most significant events in tennis history occurred. The British Lawn Tennis Association (BLTA) in defiance of the main governing body, the International Lawn Tennis Federation (ILTF), declared that the 1968 Wimbledon tournament would be open to all tennis players, regardless of whether they were amateurs or professionals. The initial reaction from the ILTF was that if the event took place the BLTA would be expelled from the international federation and any amateurs who competed would be suspended. After several months of worldwide publicity, negotiations and compromises, the ILTF backed down and approved a certain number of open tournaments throughout the world. Thus, after 40 years of controversy, open tennis became a reality. Since the very beginnings of the open tennis idea originated in the United States, it seems logical that an objective study of the United States Tennis Association (USTA), the former United States Lawn Tennis Association, would indicate the development of events that surrounded the issues of the controversy.

The United States Tennis Association, which was formed in 1881, not only was the first amateur sports governing body in the United States but is the oldest tennis association in the world. This organization was the important single influence affecting the growth and

development of tennis in this country. The Association inaugurated numerous tournaments for adults and children and also legislated important rules and regulations for the well-being of the game and its players. During the growth of the USTA it was faced with adherence to one main principle - the principle of amateurism.

The question of amateurism arose as early as 1882, the second year of the Association, and it was voted at that time that only amateurs would be allowed in tournaments sponsored by the USTA. Very few problems occurred in the beginning as tournaments were few and almost all players were definitely amateurs. Yet, as the game spread to more and more people, the complexities of the expansion opened the door to commercialism and professionalism. Much legislation was enacted as the Association tried to cope with problems concerned with its philosophy and the Amateur Code, such as the Sporting Goods Rule, the Player-Writer Rule, the Eight Weeks Rule, and changes in regulations for allowable expenses.

The issue of competition between amateur and professional players arose with the appearance of professional players who exhibited their skill for money. Consequently, the open tournament question is closely intermingled with the development of professional tennis. Even though the concept of open tournaments was approved as early as the 1930's by the USTA, it was never able to receive the necessary official sanction from the game's highest body, the ILTF, until the BLTA forced the issue.

It is obvious that since the first open at Wimbledon in 1968, the tennis world has undergone unbelievable changes. The dominant problems that face the USTA today are very much different from those in the years before 1968. The controversy of the Amateur Code and the question of open tournaments provide a colorful chapter in the history of tennis in this country.