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White Players in the Red Empire: Tennis, Virtue, Glamour and "Race" in England and Her Dominions, 1920s and 1930s

Achieving a genuine recreational as well as competitive popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, tennis was one of the most successful codes to impose a "white" playing culture on its participants. White uniforms, white shoes, and precisely demarcated white lines on court defined the limits within which the game was played. Why did it matter to play tennis in whites? What did white playing outfits mean to contemporaries? Focusing on tennis played recreationally and competitively in England and "the white Dominions," this paper examines the significance of whiteness in competition and contemporary dress culture; as an element in the elevated status of sport; as a category of virtue and glamour, and its race and gendered meanings in the interwar world of the British Empire and a commercially dynamic modernity.

This paper builds on the recent historical identification of "whiteness" as a category emerging from the period of empire and on an interest in the wider meaning of material culture. Sport presents a rich field for examining these broad themes. Tennis presents a particularly interesting case study because of its reach through societies as a game played for recreation and competition by men and women, adults, and children. By the 1920s and 1930s it had extended beyond its middle class origins to church, municipal, school and community organizations such as the YWCA and YMCA, gaining a wide social pervasiveness. Requiring players to wear white was part of playing the game, and something to which there was, apparently, little resistance. Indeed, the appeal of white attire acted as a marked attraction for some players. While there has been considerable attention paid to the style of women's dress in major tennis competitions during this period, the wider "white culture" in tennis has not been addressed.
