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Rod Laver

An Autobiography

Written by Rod Laver

With Larry Writer

Published by Allen & Unwin

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Rod Laver

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Rod Laver
with Larry Writer

ALLEN&UNWIN

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For Mary
and my family

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Foreword

by Roger Federer

If you really love the sport you play then you must study its history to understand how it has evolved into the sport we know today.

Few sports have a longer or richer history than tennis and no player occupies a bigger part of that history than Rod Laver. From my earliest tennis memories, Rod 'the Rocket' Laver stood above all others as the greatest champion our sport has known.

Winning all four majors in the same calendar year to complete the Grand Slam, on two separate occasions no less, is one of the greatest feats a player can accomplish. In 1962, Rod became only the second man to do this. Seven years later, Rod conquered the game's Everest again to become the first player – man or woman – to have won the Grand Slam for a second time. No male player has completed the Grand Slam since.

When you consider the greats who have graced the world circuit since Rod's second Slam in 1969 – Connors, Borg, McEnroe, Becker, Edberg, Lendl, Sampras, Agassi, Nadal and Djokovic – you realise just how hard it is to do. Three of us, Andre, Rafa and myself, have won all four majors but not in the same year.

This monumental achievement is what sets Rod Laver apart. This is his unique contribution to tennis history.

It wasn't until the Australian Open in January of 2006 that I actually met Rod. It was just a few days before that well-recorded occasion when, in front of 15,000 screaming centre court fans and a worldwide television audience, I broke down and cried just after Rod presented me with the Sir Norman Brookes Challenge Cup.

I was pretty relaxed but certainly tired after winning the match. When they called my name to collect the trophy from Rod Laver, in that great Melbourne Park stadium that bears his name, the magnitude of the moment finally hit me. I realised how fortunate I was to be presented the Norman Brookes trophy by Rod himself. This was a moment I will never forget.

There is a footnote to these events. At our first meeting on the Tuesday before the final, Rod and I had a chance to get to know each other. We discussed my shyness early in my career. Similarly, Rod mentioned that he, too, was shy as a young player. It was at this moment that I realised Rod and I had a lot of similarities, and I really felt comfortable in his presence.

Seeing this, my then coach and good friend of Rod's, Tony Roche, arranged for Rod and me to get together after

my quarter-final and semi-final matches. Tony had told me so many classic stories about Rod and the good old times from his playing days, so it was really great to be able to hear some of those experiences directly from Rod. It was very inspiring meeting someone like Rod, who is such an important part of the fabric and legacy of our sport. There is no doubt my chats with Rod over those few days gave me added impetus and inspiration in my quest for back to back Australian Open crowns.

Since those heady moments in Melbourne, Rod has witnessed my two most recent Wimbledon final victories – the marathon five setter against Andy Roddick in 2009 and then against Andy Murray in 2012. I wouldn't presume to call Rod my lucky charm, but his presence at any tournament is not only motivational – it also helps to bring out the best in my game. I have always appreciated it when the greats come back to the arenas in which we play, but Rod's presence is always incredibly special.

Rod retired from the circuit just a few years before I was born so I never witnessed his exquisite skills live. I have watched film of him playing in finals and was mesmerised by his all-round game and incomparable court coverage. Rod seemed to have no weaknesses and while always a true sportsman on court, he was also a man of steely determination, and was incredibly strong under pressure. Rod always brought his best game to the big stage, whether it was a Grand Slam or a Davis Cup final.

Rod changed from being an amateur player to a professional one, aged 24, after claiming the Grand Slam in 1962. As a result he was ineligible to play in the amateur-only

grand slam championships – the Australian, the French, Wimbledon and the US – until a few months before his 30th birthday in 1968, when these tournaments became open to professionals as well as amateurs. In the interim Rod missed playing for 21 grand slam titles. We can only guess how many of these he might have won.

Rod made a huge contribution to the game of tennis over his 22-year career, which started in 1956. His enormous talent was largely responsible for changing the way tennis was played. For example, Rod was the first player to master and consistently use hard hit top spin on both his forehand and backhand sides. For a left hander this was exceptional because, before the Rocket started wielding that massive left arm, no southpaw had been able to perfect the top-spin shot off the backhand side. So this was quite a feat, given the small head on those old wooden racquets. By this time Rod was on the path to becoming the No. 1 player in the world. Every other player realised they would have to eventually emulate his top-spin skills or be left behind. The result was that by the time the 1970s were in full swing, it was virtually impossible to win a big tournament unless you hit top spin like it was second nature. Rod Laver literally forced others to change the way they played the game and rethink their own playing style, technique and tactics.

Rod was also a primary catalyst for the introduction of open tennis in 1968, which completely revolutionised the structure of world tennis and, in turn, changed the game forever. By the second half of the 1960s, Rod was universally recognised as the best player in the world, with his

closest rivals for that mantle being mainly drawn from the professional ranks, including the great Pancho Gonzalez and Australian stars like Lew Hoad (Rod's own hero) and Ken Rosewall. As a result, the separation of the professional players from the amateur-only grand slam tournaments was becoming increasingly intolerable to anyone who had the best interest of tennis at heart.

The four grand slam events were beginning to lose their lustre as a result of not having all the best players compete. Many of the amateur officials were hugely resistant to change for fear of losing their influence and, often, total control of their country's players. So it is to the eternal credit of a few forward-thinking tennis administrators – notably Herman David, the chairman of the All England Club – that the momentous decision was taken to introduce open tennis in 1968. This breathed renewed life into the game and enabled the continuing evolution of tennis into the great world sport it is today. Tennis had entered the modern era and Rod had played his part.

Rod is quite simply one of the nicest individuals I have ever met. He is warm, generous and good-humoured. He conducts himself with an endearing humility that promotes his status as not only a tennis great but a genuine legend of world sport.

Family comes first with Rod, and my wife Mirka and I have the deepest admiration for Rod's absolute devotion in caring for his beloved wife, Mary, during her final years. His personal attributes of total commitment and inner strength were in play once again. Previously, Mary had

been instrumental in Rod's recovery from a debilitating stroke in 1998 and Rod reciprocated in full, until her passing in November 2012.

In the following pages, Rod tells the extraordinary story of a talented but shy freckle-faced kid from outback Queensland who, with the right support from the right people at the right time, was able to fulfil his father's dream of having a son win Wimbledon and then go on to become the world's greatest tennis player.

Rod loves tennis and everything about it and this shines through on every page. After you've finished reading his story, you will understand so much more about the game we love.

Roger Federer
September 2013

Acknowledgements

So many friends and colleagues made wonderful contributions to this book, and to the life and career in tennis that it chronicles. Thank you to you all, and to anyone else I've inadvertently omitted.

Larry Writer came to my home in Carlsbad, California, over some weeks in October 2012 armed with a tape recorder and hundreds of questions that made it easy, and a pleasure, to talk about the events of my life. Then Larry helped me to put my memories and thoughts into the words that you are about to read.

My gratitude to my manager Stephen Walter, a fine man and a dedicated one, who has always had my best interests at heart.

There is no more knowledgeable tennis man than Geoff Pollard, vice-president of the International Tennis

Federation, president of the Oceania Tennis Federation, chairman of the ITF Rules of Tennis Committee and Technical Commission, and president of Tennis Australia from 1989–2010, and I thank Geoff for reading the text for accuracy and making invaluable suggestions and amendments.

The tennis skills and winning mentality bestowed upon me by my coaches, the late Charlie Hollis and Harry Hopman, are detailed in the pages that follow. Suffice to say that without those special men I could never have been the player I was.

For their camaraderie and fair but ferocious competition I thank my peers from Australia's golden age of tennis: Ashley Cooper, Roy Emerson, Neale Fraser, the late Lew Hoad, John Newcombe, Tony Roche, Ken Rosewall, Frank Sedgman and Fred Stolle. I also pay tribute to their wives: Helen Cooper, Joy Emerson, Thea Neale, Jenny Hoad, Angie Newcombe, Sue Roche, Wilma Rosewall, Jean Sedgman and Pat Stolle. A cheer, too, to non-Aussies Charlie and Shireen Pasarell, Butch and Marilyn Buchholz, Ray and Susan Moore, and Cliff Drysdale. I thank my friends the late Frank Gorman, Jim Shepherd, and the late Mr and Mrs Cereal Shepherd, who took me under their wing when I was young.

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other tennis players of the day that movie stars can be as in awe of sports champions as we are of them.

I thank the author and businessman Robert Edsel for his friendship and his inspiration. I am similarly in the debt of my old friends Tony Godsick, who now has the honour of managing Roger Federer, and his wife Mary Jo Fernandez.

What an honour it is that the great Roger Federer has taken time out from his peerless career to pen the foreword to this book. I appreciate and am humbled by Roger's kind and generous words. For her friendship and kindness, too, I thank Roger's wife Mirka.

I am so grateful to my sponsors Rolex, Adidas and the ANZ Bank. They have had my back through thick and thin. The ANZ was my first bank as a lad, the rosewood Rolex I treated myself to three decades ago has not missed a beat and Adidas has been producing the Rod Laver shoe for more than 40 years. We have history.

Bud Collins happens to be one of the finest tennis writers and personalities who ever lived. I'm proud to count Bud and his wife Anita as friends. In 1971 Bud and I collaborated on *The Education of a Tennis Player*, a book of which I am very proud and which was a wonderful resource for this memoir, each page jogging my memory as I looked back into the past.

Without the belief, guts and know-how of the late sports promoter and businessman Lamar Hunt and his son-in-law Al Hill Jr, professional tennis as we know it could never have happened. We all owe a debt to Lamar and Al, and to Lamar's wife Norma.

In the gypsy pro years, a promoter with integrity who staged his events professionally and didn't skip town before his players were paid was worth his weight in gold. Pat Hughes was one such promoter, as well as an excellent player and Dunlop sports administrator in London.

IMG, headed by the late Mark McCormack and with Jay Lafave as my representative, for many years managed my career to perfection.

I admired the late Adrian Quest as a tennis player and a tennis journalist. I thank him for his lifelong support and wisdom. I am grateful, too, to all the other fine tennis writers who covered my career accurately and with insight.

Thank you to Chris Clouser, friend, businessman and chairman of the International Tennis Hall of Fame at Newport, Rhode Island. He and his wife Patti have been staunch allies.

The Wimbledon championships were, and remain, special to me, and under the chairmanship of Philip Brook, the All England Tennis Club is in the very best of hands. As are the Australian championships, with Steve Wood as chief executive officer of Tennis Australia.

I thank Wick Simmons and his wife Sloane. Wick, chairman of Nasdaq Stock Market Inc. and former president of Shearson Lehmann and Prudential Securities, gave great, much-needed business advice, and was a good friend and tennis partner.

Tom Gross gave wonderful service as an instructor with Laver–Emerson Tennis Holidays and is still one of the best MCs in the business.

For helping to make this book a reality, I thank John Tall for so generously and painstakingly sourcing and supplying many of the photographs that grace this book, Jennie Fairs for her meticulous research, and Tom Gilliatt, director and non-fiction publisher, and Jo Lyons, editor, of Pan Macmillan, my publisher. Thanks also to publicists Tracey Cheetham and Eve Jackson. For putting Stephen Walter and me in touch with Pan Macmillan in the first place, I owe a debt to the fine Australian writer Les Carlyon.

Last, and most of all, I thank my much-loved, much-missed wife, the late Mary Laver, for her love and her courage, for sharing my life journey, for broadening my horizons, and for helping me to understand that there is more to life than tennis and that family is everything. Love, too, to my son Rick, his wife Sue and their daughter and my grand-daughter Riley. Loving thoughts also to my late parents, Roy and Melba, and brother Bob, to my sister Lois and her husband Vic, and my brother Trevor and Trevor's wife Betty, whose marvellous and encyclopaedic self-published recounting of my career, *The Red-Headed Rocket from Rockhampton*, was as affectionate as it was accurate and, like *The Education of a Tennis Player*, a priceless resource for this book. Another of Betty's blessings is her wonderful work scouring the Laver photograph albums to find many of the candid family shots in our photo sections. And by welcoming me into their lives, Mary's children Ann Marie Bennett and Ron and Stephen Benson, Ann Marie's husband Kipp and Ron's wife Julie have given me a gift I treasure.

Acronyms

ATP	Association of Tennis Professionals
ILTF	International Lawn Tennis Federation
ILTPA	International Lawn Tennis Players Association, later changed to International Tennis Players Association
IMG	International Management Group
IPA	International Players Association
IPTPA	International Professional Tennis Players Association (LA)
ITPA	International Tennis Players Association
LET	Laver–Emerson Tennis
LTA	Lawn Tennis Association (Yugoslavia)
LTAA	Lawn Tennis Association of Australia
NTL	National Tennis League
WCT	World Championship Tennis

Chapter 1

Bush boy

Tennis was a big part of my life from as far back as I can remember. What else was a kid to do? Growing up in those years when my family and I were moving around rural Queensland, I can't remember a house, backyard or paddock that wasn't littered with tennis racquets and tennis balls . . . along with, of course, footballs, cricket bats and six stitchers. And it wasn't just me. If you lived in Australia in the '40s and '50s, those golden, more innocent times before the public tennis courts that were ubiquitous on Australia's rural and suburban blocks were banished by houses, flats, offices, parking lots, factories and shopping malls, tennis was what you played. It was every bit as much a national pastime as cricket, footy and swimming. A tennis racquet was as prevalent in a boy's life then as PlayStations, iPods and mobile phones are today. That being so, and with

tennis-mad parents, brothers, in-laws and mates like mine, I had little choice but to play the game.

I was born on 9 August 1938, just one month before the American Donald Budge won the first ever tennis Grand Slam, in Rockhampton's Tannachy Hospital, the third child of Melba (named after Dame Nellie, naturally) and Roy Laver. My brother Trevor was six years older and Bob had four years on me. Sister Lois arrived nine years after I came along. Dad was a cattleman, a loving, caring father but, like most bushies, a tough, hard bloke who treated his own farm injuries (mainly because there was no hospital handy). Home for us was Langdale, a 9300-hectare cattle property an hour's drive from the town of Marlborough, which is 96 kilometres north of Rocky. My father, who was raised in Gippsland, Victoria, was one of 13 kids, eight of them boys, so the Laver brothers were able to field the best part of a cricket or football team and four tennis doubles teams in local comps. My mother also hailed from a sporting family, the Roffeys. Mum's mother, Alice Roffey, rode horses until she passed away at age 90.

Queenslanders have always been tough, self-reliant people, but, apart from the heat, tropical rain and those beautiful old wide-verandah Queenslander homes, rural Queensland in the 1940s would be all but unrecognisable to anyone who has known it only in modern times. Most roads were unsealed, and I remember kangaroos bounding alongside the family car as we travelled the long distances from town to town, farm to farm. When I was a boy, with World War II being waged, the federal government introduced

measures to aid the war effort. There were blackouts and brownouts in the cities and larger towns to deter Japanese air raids, food was rationed and fun was too, with sporting events confined to weekends. Mum and Dad had to carry personal ID cards. There were fewer blokes about because many were serving overseas. Short back and sides was the hairstyle of choice for Queensland men, the vast majority of whom smoked rollies and wore wide-brimmed felt hats and suit coats in a heatwave.

There was no TV back then, so radio was the main source of entertainment and war news. The newsreel that was screened before the cartoons and the double movie bill at the local picture theatre was another way of keeping up to date with how we were faring against the Germans and Japanese. Churches on Sundays were full to brimming. After church, people gathered in the church hall to devour sandwiches and tea and talk about the weather and its effect on crops, after which it was home for a Sunday roast with family and friends, no matter how hot the day. Eating out on a Sunday was impossible for the simple reason that pubs and cafes were not allowed to open on the Sabbath. Other days, when restaurants were open, proprietors insisted that male patrons wear a collar and tie. Lew Hoad told me how difficult it was to dine out when he was a young player travelling the rural Queensland tournament circuit. He said he was routinely abused and denied entry by restaurant staff if he entered dressed casually. Dressing to the nines can be a challenge when you're living out of a suitcase.

When I was a toddler, Dad's favourite sport was tennis and he was determined that it become ours. To this end my brothers carted great quantities of ant bed – you knock over an ant hill and crush the pebbles into smooth, hard grit, which plays a little like fast clay – and loam, laid it in the yard, surrounded it with a wire perimeter fence, erected a net, scratched out some markings . . . and we had our own tennis court. We rolled and watered it every day to stop it from cracking, or being washed or blown into the next paddock by rain or wind. That upkeep was a small price to pay given the fun we had on that ant-bed court. There was no quarter given or asked when I got a little older and played against my brothers, or against my parents for that matter, and making it even more interesting was that the court's bounce was anything but true so you had no clue where the ball was going to go. Centre court at Wimbledon it was not.

What with tennis on our makeshift court, backyard cricket in wide, grassy paddocks and doing my lessons – reluctantly, I have to admit – by correspondence, life was idyllic on the property for the Laver boys, little blokes with sun hats, T-shirts, shorts and no shoes. With my flaming hair, sticking-out ears and 49,000 freckles, I'm told I was the spitting image of Ginger Meggs in the Sunday newspaper comics. We hunted kangaroos and rode horses, playing at being cowboys. That Langdale paddock became the endless plains of the wild west, even though horses and I got off to an unfortunate start. When I was two, Dad lifted me up into the saddle of one of our horses and led it across the paddock but somewhere along the way I fell off without my

father realising and when he reached the stable and saw the empty saddle he hightailed it back to retrieve me.

Life was everything a boy could wish for, so we were not pleased when Dad, who wasn't the only one finding it tough to make ends meet on the land, took us off the property and relocated us all to a house in the backblocks of Marlborough, where he'd found work as a butcher. Trevor, Bob and I attended the tiny local school where I excelled at tennis against my school mates – though unlike my tennis pals, schoolwork got the better of me.

When I was 10, we moved again, to Rockhampton, because Dad, now in his 50s, could make more money butchering in a bigger town. Besides, he and Mum believed my brothers and I would receive a better education at Rockhampton Grammar School than at Marlborough. And, even more importantly, there was a well-organised tennis competition at the Rockhampton Association courts, where my parents played mixed doubles, and my brothers and I singles and doubles. It was about then that I realised I had a better-than-ordinary talent to follow and strike a tennis ball, and being naturally left-handed probably helped me too because lefties were in the minority so I was awkward for others to play against.

We lived on Lakes Creek Road for a while and then moved to a Queenslander in Main Street Park Avenue. I'm told I had a thing for climbing up onto the roof of our house and sitting there, only coming down when I got hungry. I was at Rocky Grammar for three years and then finished my primary education at Park Avenue School near our home

before following Trevor and Bob to Rockhampton High School, which they left after completing the first two years. Trev then worked in our cousin Len Laver's sports store and Bob, much to everyone's envy, got a job at Paul's Ice Cream Works.

Right through school, I was a handy cricketer, a batsman and a left-arm spinner who bowled leg breaks. One afternoon when I was 11, I came home after playing cricket for my school and when Trevor asked me how I'd fared I said, 'Oh, okay, I guess, I took nine wickets for seven runs.' I wasn't being modest, it was just no big deal for me. I don't think I even realised these were amazing figures. As far as I was concerned I'd just had a good day and a whole lot of fun.

I was a keen fisherman, sitting for hours on the banks of the Fitzroy River and often returning home in the gathering dusk with a sugar bag filled with fish for dinner. I hear that fishing is one of the most dangerous of pastimes and it certainly proved hazardous for me when, after netting barramundi in the Fitzroy, I suffered a mishap that easily could have ruined my tennis career. I was absent-mindedly digging my fish-cleaning knife into the sand when it hit a rock and somehow the blade sliced into my left hand, my racquet hand, and severed the tendon in my little finger. Another centimetre or two and it could have cut off my fingers or slashed the arteries in my wrist. The cut bled heavily. I staunched the flow by wrapping my hand in my T-shirt and ran home. We lived too far from the hospital to have the cut stitched and the wound, though a nasty one, healed itself in time. To this day I have no feeling in that finger. Playing

tennis, I had to alter my racquet grip to compensate for the injury, and my fingers, which forever after would stick stiffly out, were always catching on the left-hand side pocket of my shorts. In the end, Mum sewed up my pocket.

In many respects life today is better for children, but I reckon in some ways we had it very good. Surely playing games in the open air and swimming and fishing for barramundi in Moore Creek and the waterhole at Park Avenue Powerhouse is better than going cross-eyed in front of a computer game screen or living life vicariously watching TV.

We had our movies, but even a night at the flicks was an adventure for us in those long-ago country Queensland days. In Rockhampton there was an outdoor theatre . . . just a big canvas screen set up in a vacant lot with rows of folding chairs in front of it (though you could sit on the grass if you wanted) and a projector that shone its magical rays through hordes of bugs and summer moths up onto the canvas rectangle. Somehow, in my memory, it was always John Wayne rounding up the baddies on that screen, and rain, hail or moonlight we wouldn't leave until the big fella had brought the last black-hatted desperado to justice. Even today, 60 years on and with the Duke long a resident of Boot Hill, I'm one of his biggest fans and will happily watch a western any day of the week. When I was touring on the pro circuit with Alex Olmedo, it bothered him that the Indians always got it in the neck in the westerns we watched at the movies or on the hotel room TV. So Alex, who was an Inca Indian from Peru whose nickname was 'The Chief', would wait until the Indians were winning, usually in the very

early part of the movie, and then he'd up and leave before they inevitably bit the dust in the final reel. 'I know we Indians will lose in the end, so I'm getting out of here while we're still ahead,' he'd say.

When Dad was looking for a place for us to live, one of his requirements was that the yard must have sufficient room for us to lay another homemade tennis court. At the Main Street Park Avenue house we were able to clear the scrub and Dad, Bob, Trev and I carted the soil and silt in his truck from the Fitzroy River and laid the court in the clearing. The good thing about silt, apart from being a good playing surface, is that when it dries and it's windy the sand is blown off but when you water it again, more sand rises and holds it all together.

This time, we fitted out our home court for night play by stringing four 1500-watt light bulbs on an overhead wire down the centre of the court. Any of us kids who broke a bulb with a lob or smash was in for it. Those lights were dim, so consequently our eyes grew sharp trying to see the ball in the gloom and the ability I acquired to see the ball clearly and early stood me in good stead right through my career. The Lavers' court was a magnet for local tennis players and was in constant use, as we played against each other and all-comers from kilometres around. One fellow who extended us was the young future champion Mal Anderson. Both my brothers were excellent players. Trevor was possibly the better, but Bob was no slouch and would grow up to be a tennis coach. One thing about Trev, though: when he played his emotions bubbled to the surface. If

he was struggling in a match, everyone knew about it. He grumbled and griped and his shoulders sagged. I enjoyed playing against him when he was angry, because his mind wasn't on the match. It occurred to me that it would benefit me to play without emotion – well, without emotion that others could see, anyway. Card players profited from having a poker face so opponents wouldn't know how good or bad their hand was, and I figured a deadpan expression would work in tennis, too.

I was always happy when one of my brothers came home from school before the other, because then he'd be forced to have a hit-up with me. As soon as my other brother arrived, I'd be booted off the court so they could play each other. 'Scram, kid,' they'd say. One solution was to find Mum and she'd team with me to play Trevor and Bob in doubles. If she couldn't, I'd occupy myself hitting against a wall, studying what a ball did on impact after I'd connected with a particular shot: would it shoot forward, spin back towards me or to the side, bounce high or drop dead? I also hit along a grass cricket pitch. One day Dad came home with the wood to build a back wall. My job was to screw the wooden panels onto a wooden frame. I did it wrong and assembled the panels vertically instead of horizontally, which meant that the panels warped. Happily, there was an up-side. When I hit a tennis ball against the wonky wall, the ball came back at me any which way and I had to be in position to return it. All of this helped my reflexes, anticipation and my footwork enormously.

I loved tennis. It seemed the natural game for me to play. I played in the rain and the wind, and under the blistering

Queensland sun, which would soon cause my floppy sun hat to become saturated with sweat. To counter that, on very hot days I occasionally placed wet cabbage leaves inside my hat to keep my head wet and cool. Over the years, some media profiles of me have made out that I never left home without my hat filled with cabbage leaves. Nice story, but not true.

What I loved was the satisfaction of hitting the ball sweetly, the running to ram home a point or save one, the one-on-one combative nature of the game, facing up to an opponent and testing yourself against him. I think only boxing is as confrontational. There is a kinship between the two sports. You have two people facing each other in a contained space, probing for weakness and attacking it. Tennis players and boxers need footwork, timing and stamina.