

The doctor is in.....

In this months article, we will visit the maternity ward for court tennis racquets...!!

Court tennis has many nuances. One of the hallmarks that separates it from all other sports is asymmetry. We see this in the layout of the court itself and also in each and every handmade tennis ball. Probably what is most emblematic is the racquet itself. The slightly curved and small head area is something that catches the attention of every newcomer to the sport as well as the casual spectator. The dimensions of the racquet make a game a bit more challenging but it maintains the tradition of our long-standing sport. It also maintains the integrity of the sport. By adhering to strict standards, all court tennis racquets are extremely similar. Every player essentially is using the same equipment so that no one gains an unfair technical advantage.

We have seen how advances in racquet technology has had a profound affect on lawn tennis in the past 50 years. Wood racquets have gone away of the Dodo bird. The average racquet head size now averages over 100 in.². The newer graphite models are much lighter and still have significant amounts of power. This may have benefited the club player but professional game is now radically different. Serve & volleys are an endangered species. An approach shot is a rare sighting and we rarely here about "all court" players.

This is not to say that court tennis didn't face its challenges. In the early 1970s, Gene Scott, a top US player, went on court and played with a Wilson T-2000. This was a new metal lawn tennis racquet. He was a former top 20 lawn tennis player and was known in the court tennis world for being a fierce volleyer and power player. After the match, an emergency meeting was held and the racquet was outlawed.

Years later, a graphite court tennis racket was manufactured. It was discontinued shortly after.



True court tennis racquets must conform to strict specifications and must be made entirely from wood products. There are only a few places that manufacture these racquets in the world. Grays of Cambridge has been making racquets for over 100 years. They currently account for over 98% of all the racquets in use.

While back in England this past May for an international competition, I thought it may be interesting to visit the factory and see how the racquets were made. I was prepared for some resistance and corporate red tape but when I requested a site visit on the phone, they could not have been anymore friendlier and inviting. On a rainy afternoon, I drove to a small town just west of Cambridge.

I was looking for some sort of a large corporate manufacturing facility, but instead I was pleasantly surprised to pull up in front of a modest country building.



I walked inside and was greeted by Tim Dowe, the senior member of the Grays team. He was about to celebrate his 50th year of working there. The front room had a wall that was lined with racquets from court tennis and Racquets.



After a brief discussion about the history of the factory, we proceeded into the main manufacturing area. There were stockpiles of wood. Tim explained that there were



only 2 types of wood. Ash is very strong and used for most of the racquet and Willow, which is used specifically in the throat. I was led from station to station to see racquets in all different phases of development.

Strips of Ash were treated and then placed in braces to obtain proper curvature. They were then layered and connected with epoxy and placed in braces to cure.



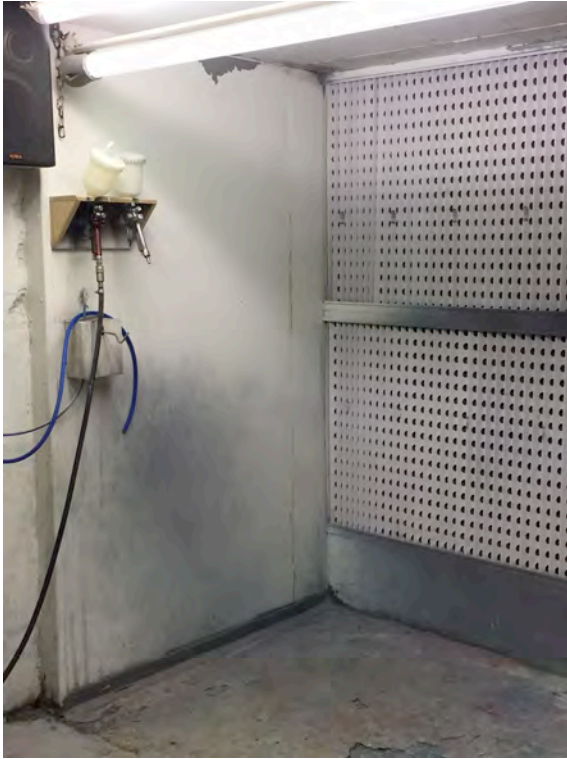
There was a whole topic of discussion on leatheroid, the thin dark layer that is seen both inside and on the edges of the finished racquets. Many people believe that this is made from lead or graphite. It is actually made of crushed paper and is manufactured in Germany. Steve Ronaldson is credited with discovering and recommending it to be incorporated into the racquets.



The racquets are then sanded and polished down into its final form.



There is a special room in the back just for the proper painting of the graphics.



When you hold a finished product in your hands on the site where it has been manufactured, one gains a tremendous appreciation for the phenomenal craftsmanship and the amount of time and effort it takes just to make one court tennis bat. These are not only competition worthy sports equipment but they are actually are functional works of art. I encouraged anyone visiting England and in the Cambridge area to stop by the factory as they are very welcoming of the visitors. Perhaps after seeing the process of making a racquet yourself, you may be less inclined to take out your frustrations on the real tennis court on your hand crafted, beautiful racquet...!