

DEATH BY REAL TENNIS by Dr. Anders Cohen

The title sounds a bit scary, but in the wake of the recent scare at the US open this year, I believe a little bit of historical perspective may be of some interest.

In my travels abroad this past year, I was fortunate not only to play on so many beautiful and interesting different real tennis courts but I was also able to learn of many of the historical accounts that add to the flavor of the sport. After visiting the club at Leamington, I reviewed their comprehensive website. I came upon some interesting historical events including the death of an adolescent from a tennis accident. I kept this in mind and made a note to follow up on this when I returned to England. I returned this past month to play some tournaments and afterwards had some time to play at some additional courts. After finishing at Moreton Morrell, I found myself only 40 miles away from the site of this tennis accident.

In the town of Elford, west of Birmingham, is St. Peter's church. I drove there and arrived just at dusk on a Saturday. To my chagrin, the church was closed.

Not willing to give up easily, I read the signs on the door and was able to recognize the phone number of the Rector. A pleasant man answered the phone and I explained my wacky pilgrimage. He seemed quite unfazed and was willing to drive up to meet me at the church. Phillip Burgess is husband of the Rector and he let me in to the church. The church itself is quite beautiful and very historical on it's own account. He stated that rarely a week goes by that someone doesn't visit to see about this tragic tennis event.



We went inside and in the front corner of the church are several sarcophagus's. In the corner was the one I was looking for.



John Stanley died in 1460. He was 13 years old at the time. He was the grandson of Lord Stanley and the sole male heir to the bloodline. According to history, he was struck in the head by a tennis ball and died shortly after. The cover of his tomb shows a young boy holding a tennis ball in his left hand and pointing to his right temple with his right hand. There is a puppy dog at his feet. There is an inscription on the side in Latin stating "Ibi dolor, ibi digitus". This translates in English to "where the pain is, they're the finger will be".

From a medical perspective, there is a very plausible explanation as to what occurred back in 1460. Most likely, the boy was struck in the right temple region by a real tennis ball. This area medical is also known as the sphenoid region. The bone here is very thin. More importantly, a branch of the carotid artery crosses through the bone to feed the scalp. A fracture of the bone in this area can injure the artery and can result in a blood clot inside the skull known as an epidural hematoma. When this occurs, it is instantaneously life-threatening and a victim can die within hours of the injury. Anyone who can remember the unfortunate accident of Natasha Richardson that happened on the ski slopes a few years ago, she suffered the same type of injury and went to sleep and never woke up.

What didn't make sense to Mr. Burgess at the church and the people in Elford was how a blow to the head from a tennis ball could cause such damage.

Fortunately, I bought a real tennis racket and a real tennis ball with me into the church. When he was able to see how the ball was solid and different from a lawn tennis ball, it instantly made sense. He explained that most of the visitors assume that it is a modern lawn tennis ball that caused the injury to poor John Stanley.



Anyone who is going to visit the tennis courts at Leamington or Moreton Morrell, I highly encourage you to take the side trip to St. Peter's church. The church is very inviting and welcoming to visitors and I believe it is of great interest to us who find the sports so addictively interesting. It also helps to validate the lineage of real tennis and that this unfortunate accident happened some 550 years ago....!!!!