

THE LAWN TENNIS CHAMPIONSHIPS.

(By H. A. PARKER.)

During the last fourteen months I have taken part in the championships of every State in Australasia, with the exception of Tasmania, and I propose, therefore, to criticise the meetings recently held in New Plymouth, from an Australian and not a local standpoint. It is always interesting to see ourselves as others see us, and in the present instance it must be understood that I am taking the best Australian championships as my standard, and also that any weak points I may draw attention to are mentioned in the best interests of the sport, and also of the players themselves.

Before speaking of the play itself I may say at once that I have nothing but praise for the New Plymouth courts, and their surroundings and accessories. The chief Australian meetings, Brisbane and Perth excepted, hold their championships on open cricket grounds, and although the surface of these is excellent, and well suited for tennis, they are very exposed to the wind, and the absence of a definite background makes it difficult for any but the most experienced players to gauge the strength of their shots. It is quite a common thing to have defective nets at Australian meetings, and I consider that an umpire should not be called on to decide whether a ball went through the net or not. The umpires' seats, the posts, etc., were all quite up to date, and the New Plymouth club can consider itself above criticism in this respect. The courts themselves were in splendid order, and distinctly superior to those I played on a month previously in the Melbourne championships; in fact I can hardly recollect anything in the nature of a false bound right through the meeting.

The management, too, was all that could be desired. Having had a very wide experience of the running of tournaments throughout the world, the first thing that would have grated on me would have been any incompetency in making the arrangements, but here again I am compelled to admit that I could not have suggested any improvement in any way, and I congratulate Mr. Paton and his assistants on the able manner in which they brought matters to a successful conclusion within the specified time. To get through an entry the size of the Taranaki meeting which followed on the heels of the N.Z. Tournament, in one day under the allotted time, was a very clever piece of arrangement, and I have no doubt that the New Plymouth officials fully appreciated the help and advice tendered by Mr. G. N. Goldie, the popular secretary of the N.Z.L.T.A.

In criticising the play, I will first deal with the men. On the whole I must say that I was not specially impressed with the form shown by the majority of the leading players with the exception of Fisher and Quill. The former of these two I consider a most dangerous opponent, and probably the best all-round man in New Zealand. His success must be attributed to the fact that he has a very good idea of almost all the strokes in the game, and furthermore he has the aptitude to make a correct use of them in whatever style of game he may be playing, whether a single or men's doubles, or mixed. I consider Fisher has great natural gifts for lawn tennis, and also considerable possibilities of improving still further if he could get regular practice against first-class men. One point he should improve is his second service, which is very weak if he serves a plain one. His reverse American service is very effective, and I think it would pay him to specialise this variety still further, and send down first and second services at the same pace, and follow them to the net. On his present play he would probably be classed about third or fourth in either New South Wales or Victoria, and in a single I would consider him almost equal to either Dunlop or Heath. The most serious bar to his success would be that his condition is apparently not of the best, and without proper systematic training a hard five set match would find him wanting; and moreover he does not always play the best game he is capable of.

Quill, who beat Peacock in the penultimate round of the N.Z. Championship Singles, is quite a different stamp of player, who owes his success to about

hard work and intelligent practice. He has risen so rapidly into the front rank of New Zealand players that he still has some points to improve in his style of play, and he requires more confidence in his own powers to enable him to beat inferior players by a larger margin. He and Fisher are the only two players whom I can honestly say adopt modern tactics in their methods of placing. Quill is a very difficult man to beat, owing to his wonderful power of getting the ball back, whilst his condition is undoubted, and his driving quite first class, both on the forehand and backhand. Moreover, he often follows his American service to the net, and makes a neat, low volley off the return. His weakest point is his smashing, the reason of this being that he does not get sufficiently over the ball, and hits it too far away from him. I always consider that the combined events are the best school in which to learn to smash properly, as the man is continually having to make this stroke, and I would recommend Quill to take up this branch of the game, if only for this special object. In singles, Quill would about hold his own with the fifth and sixth men in the N.S.W. and Victorian teams, and he is practically on a par with the best players in South Australia and Queensland. Cox and Peacock I would class together a shade behind Quill in singles, as they lack the sustained accuracy necessary to win championships. Both these players are exponents of the brilliant game, and at their best might put up a great performance, but in forming comparisons, an average must be taken. Cox and Peacock have their strokes very highly developed, and are most stylish and attractive players to watch, but right here, as an American would say, I must point out that those deep, brilliant drives are too stereotyped, and not sufficiently varied to be effective. It is commonly thought that a good length ball is always one that pitches near the base line, and that such is always preferable to any other, but this is a fallacy. Good length is, of course, the backbone of the driving game, but my idea of good length is to put the ball where your opponent is not. For example, if he happens to be well outside his base line, a good length ball would be a short one, and a drop shot for preference. Fisher is extremely clever with this latter shot. To make it properly, the racket should be held loosely about half-way up the handle, and a slight under-cut imparted. All players should master this stroke, which, after all, only requires delicacy of touch and a little nerve. The players I am dealing with, viz., Cox and Peacock, will have to mix their deep drives with others at a more accurate angle, if they do not wish to be left behind in the future. These players also need to be reminded that condition is absolutely essential, as Cox showed signs of distress towards the close of his match with Peacock, while the latter could not stand the gruelling he received from Quill, and clearly threw up the sponge at the finish.

Dickie and Wallace are a sterling pair, and would take a heap of beating anywhere. I have played against them several times now, and think that, on the whole, their double game is more sound than it was. Wallace has probably the finest and cleanest style of anyone in New Zealand, and, in fact, it would be hard to suggest any improvement in this respect. Both work with the utmost vigour, and their win in the Doubles Championship was thoroughly merited. In singles, I do not think that either of them play quite so well as a year or two ago, but this is simply the result of an insufficiency of hard practice, and I feel sure that were they situated where good, regular practice was obtainable they would soon be in the first flight of N.Z. players, while Wallace would make a name for himself anywhere.

Outside these few players, I did not notice anyone likely to develop championship form in the near future, but several of the younger players showed a distinct advance, noticeably H. W. Brown, Pearce, and J. G. Swainson. The first-named has improved out of all knowledge, and I found him a hard nut to crack in the championship. He has a most severe forehand drive, which he places well, and his backhand is also quite good. Pearce is like Wallace in being unable to obtain hard practice, but he is game to the last, and is by no means an easy man to dispose of. He has a peculiar smack with his forehand, which is practically unreturnable.

Swainson I have never seen play before, but I was especially impressed with his forehand drive, which is one of the most beautifully executed strokes I have ever seen, but he should change his backhand grip, which is faulty, and does not permit him to make an attacking stroke. If he lived in one of the principal centres he would unquestionably become a top-notch.

From what I have said in the foregoing it will be gathered that I do not consider a New Zealand team would at this juncture have a very good chance of beating either New South Wales or Victoria in a six-a-side match, though if Wilding were available it would make a big difference. Lawn Tennis has gone ahead considerably in New South Wales and Victoria, and some very promising young players have come to light and a very even six can be put in the field. Of the other States, I think South Australia and Queensland would put up a moderate fight against New Zealand, but they would be hardly strong enough, whilst West Australia would be out of it, and Tasmania hopelessly so.

In the ladies' department, things are far more hopeful, and I think New Zealand has a very strong team available. To begin with, in Miss Nunnally New Zealand has a player who, when on her game, could not probably be matched in Australia to-day. Miss Payten, the only lady likely to have beaten her has unfortunately been compelled to retire from the game temporarily through illness, and though Miss Baker, who is Sydney's next best player, actually beat Miss Nunnally in the Taranaki Meeting, I do not for a moment consider her the equal of the N.Z. champion. Personally, I think Miss Nunnally is playing as well as she ever did in her palmist days, and her driving is as deadly as ever. The fact that she takes the ball near the top of the bound gives her an immense advantage over the other ladies, as she is on the ball too quickly to allow them to recover position.

Miss Powdrell has again shown that she is second only to Miss Nunnally by her performances at the meeting, but second she will remain until she can manage to take the ball at a higher elevation than she does at present. She appears to use her strokes to better advantage than formerly; no doubt as a result of increased experience. Miss Ward is, to my mind, quite the most improved lady player of them all, and I should hardly have recognised her as the player of two years ago. She has developed quite the best service of any lady in New Zealand, and it has plenty of pace, and breaks away very awkwardly to the backhand. Her ground strokes are sufficiently severe and very accurate, while she keeps her head well, and can volley at a pinch. My previous remarks about making a better use of the angles of the court in driving apply with even more force in the case of the ladies, as, not being volleyers, they are dependent for success on their base-line play, and they should also cultivate the drop shot, which would successfully terminate many a rally.

It is not easy to gauge Miss Travers' strength, as she plays such an in-and-out game. When her eye is in she is almost invincible, and her drives are a treat to watch; but not infrequently she is off her game, and she is then an easy prey for a steady opponent. And now I come to Miss R. Wellwood, who is unquestionably the most promising player New Zealand possesses. With hardly any experience of tournament play, she can already hold her own fairly well against any of the above players, except Miss Nunnally. She has every qualification to enable her to reach a very high standard. Though barely out of her teens, she plays with all the "savoir faire" of a veteran, and does not get in the least rattled at a critical moment. Her back-hand is made in better style than that of any other lady competitor; but a habit of lifting her left foot in making a forehand drive makes this stroke a little unsteady on occasion. She was unlucky in meeting Miss Ward in the first round of both events, as the latter is just a shade too steady for her at present, though each match was splendidly contested. She appears to have better staying powers than the majority of ladies, and possesses the inestimable advantage of being a first-class runner.

I look upon these five ladies as being certainties for the team which it is proposed to send to Sydney next March, and if a strong sixth player can be found I do not think that New South Wales will have much chance of retaining the honours. If Miss Bremer has returned

from London it will help to make the match a more level one, but, even so, I will pin my faith to the Dominion representatives. The Sydney ladies are far better volleyers than our players, no doubt owing to the fact that Miss Payten, on whom they have modelled their play, is "par excellence" a volleyer; but to volley successfully one must be in proximity to the net, and I do not think that Miss Gardiner or the Misses Gordon will have much opportunity of indulging in volleying against the hard driving of our ladies in the singles. In doubles, of course, the case is different, and some trouble may be experienced in passing the Sydney pairs when at the net, but if it would not be considered disloyal to my adopted State, I would like to suggest that the lob is more or less of a "settler" when both opposing ladies are up.

The Australian courts are much harder than ours, and the ball consequently has a larger bound, and, as the light is much brighter, the ball often appears to be closer than it really is, and I expect our representatives will find themselves mistiming their strokes for a few days, and I would therefore urge upon the N.Z.L.T.A. the absolute necessity of arranging for a week's practice in Sydney before the matches begin. The hard courts and high bounding balls will be all in favour of Miss Nunnally, who should win the Singles, especially as she has had previous experience of the conditions in Australia, and I should imagine that Miss Ward and Miss Wellwood will also show to advantage, but I should like to see Misses Powdrell and Travers take the ball a little higher off the ground, as this is even of greater importance in Australia than New Zealand.

It was a great pleasure to again welcome Miss Hilda Hitchings to a New Zealand Tournament, and though short of practice she was playing in extremely good form at the finish, especially in the match when she and Miss Wellwood defeated Misses Powdrell and Travers. Of the other ladies I thought Miss Gray most nearly approached championship form, more especially as she showed plenty of enterprise and volleyed well, her overhead work being as good as that of many of the men.

Almost all New Zealand players show far too great a tendency to hug the base line, and I mean this remark to include the men as well as the ladies. Personally, I play the base line game from choice and because it would probably be too late for me to make any radical change in my game, which would be likely to be any improvement on my present style, but it is my decided opinion, based on the results of my observations at outside meetings that the volley is far too neglected in New Zealand. Young players, especially if they aspire to Championship honours, should remember that the greatest players of to-day, such as Norman Brookes, B. Doherty, Beals, Wright, etc., are in the main, volleyers, and I would therefore advise them to cultivate an effective service which could be followed to the net with fair chances of killing the return with a volley, and further, to lose no reasonable opportunity of getting to the net after making a good length stroke. Doing this, practically compels one's opponent to make a difficult stroke to win the point, and it is surprising how many mistakes even a first-class man will make when he is hustled at the net. It should be the aim of every volleyer to cultivate his powers of anticipation, as this will enable him to cut off many a drive which would otherwise have passed him. No stone should be left unturned to make advances in style, and particularly in accuracy, as the latter is essential for winning matches, and in perfecting weak strokes. I have found an intelligent use of the volleying board of the greatest use to me. A large number of players attend tournaments just for the pleasure of the game, and no doubt they extract a great deal of enjoyment from their matches, but the keenest enjoyment to be extracted from any game is the sense of gradual and steady improvement, coupled with a fixed determination to forge to the front, and the few hints that I have given are chiefly intended to help players of this stamp who are ambitious to excel.

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