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Ball Kid

Learning Life's Lessons,
From a Boss's Savvy
To a Poet's Imagery

By JOHN MARTIN

MELBOURNE — When the first shots started spraying the courts at the Australian Open last month, a tanned, white-haired man switched on his television set and peered back in time.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe was a 13-year-old ball boy for the 1946 Davis Cup match between Australia and the United States, the first played after World War II.



Wallace-Crabbe

Jack Kramer and Ted Schroeder won the cup, 5-0, to return it to the United States.

But it was their American teammate, Frankie Parker, who left an indelible impression.

"Parker was the only bad-tempered one, even hitting a ball at one of us, for some offense," said Wallace-Crabbe.

Within a decade, the young Australian began forging a career as a university professor (including stints at Harvard and Yale). Today, he is one of Australia's foremost poets.

As this year's Open unfolded, Wallace-Crabbe saw ball kids wearing sunglasses, tangerine-colored caps and shirts, and navy blue shorts. His 1946 colors were white or khaki. Today's flashy garb mystified the poet.

"There must be some point in all their orange tops and caps," he said, mischievously. "Are they working for the Dutch soccer team, on the side?"

While he has yet to write an *Ode to the Ball Boy*, images of tennis appear in many of his poems. In "My Ghost," Wallace-Crabbe concludes:

*they just might glimpse my feathery shade
playing what he has always played,*

*ghostly tennis, hour after hour.
Whom does he play against?*

And by what power?



AUSSIE ANGLE: An Australian boy dressed for work.

Despite often gaudy attire, today's ball kids serve as a link to a simpler time, when tennis's virtues were more widely seen as good sportsmanship, fair play, hard work.

Today, ball kids across the globe remain mostly young and impressionable, eager to please, often uncertain of their status, and everywhere prized for their service.

What they do on court hasn't changed much.



World Tennis Gazette Photos

NEW BALLS: A French boy turns to deliver six new balls to players in Paris. The French *ballos* (ball kids) follow a strict regimen, singing songs to build *esprit*.

"Looking carefully," Wallace-Crabbe said, "I think most of the ball boy actions appear to be those we, too, were taught."

The lessons ball kids learn remain remarkably similar as well: Teamwork, timing, and self-control.

"I suppose I learned discipline," Wallace-Crabbe said. "It was all quite tense, having to throw the ball with one bounce to the player's dominant hand, and then scurry fast across the court itself."

But there, perhaps, the similarities end.

In 1946, the future poet and his teammates were recruited from Scotch College, a Melbourne school located across a narrow creek from the Kooyong Tennis Club, where the Davis Cup matches were held.

Today, the search for Australian Open ball kids stretches across oceans. Last year, a team led by Emily Hewatt, 24, the program's newest coordinator, staged try-outs in South Korea, India, and Singapore as well as across Australia's vast continent. The team recruited 337 ball kids from 1,400 applicants.

The French hold tryouts for as many as 2,700 boys and girls across seven cities in France. The U.S. Open welcomes 400-500 applicants to its tryouts, almost all from the United States. Wimbledon chooses its teams from about 700 applicants living in five counties surrounding the All England Club.

Ball kids perform one of the most useful tasks in tennis: Keep things moving. If everything clicks, they are invisible.

"I lament that when watching on TV," said Wallace-Crabbe, "I scarcely notice the ball persons at all."

Seen or not, this is often their first job in the adult world, offering towels, water, new balls and running errands.

At Wimbledon, ball kids judged not ready for service are sent on "banana runs", delivering the fruit to outlying courts.

At the four major international championships, ball kids earn anything from a pat on the back and incidental expenses (Wimbledon) to a modest food allowance, racquets,



DELIVERY: Tossing underhanded, Aussie boy observes tradition of rolling the ball.

bags, balls, prizes, and coupons (Australia) to slightly above the minimum hourly wage (U.S. Open).

To satisfy sponsors in virtually every professional tennis venue around the world, today's ball kids must perform their duties while wearing tennis's equivalent of a sandwich board.

In Melbourne, their clothing advertises an insurance company and a clothing designer; in Paris, a bank; at Wimbledon and in New York, a global sportswear company.

The commercialization of clothing is the most radical change to overtake tennis's youngest workers since they first arrived to serve at Wimbledon in the 1920s.

Drawn from England's Shaftesbury Homes, a charitable trust established in the mid-19th Century, they were described as orphans and, with little explanation, as "delinquents."

The practice of recruiting from orphanages was discontinued in 1967, when the All England Club began drawing volunteers from nearby schools.

Ten years later, the first ball girls appeared — but were largely invisible.

"They were banished" to remote courts, said Anne Rundle, the All England Club's head trainer who began as an assistant in 1969. The reason, she said: "I don't think he (Charles Lane) thought girls could do the job."

Commander Charles Lane, a retired military officer, re-learned only near the end of his tenure, Rundle said — when



BANANA RUN: Wimbledon girl delivering fruit.

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Richard Osborn
Editor: John Martin



PERFORMANCE ANXIETY: Wimbledon ball kids watch tapes of their work, hear Anne Rundle's evaluations.

his eyesight was failing.

Evaluating a crew of ball persons, "He'd say, 'Look at that dreadful girl over there' and it was nearly always a boy," Rundle said. "We never told him."

Today, applicants of both genders consult a Wimbledon website to take an online examination which determines whether they will receive training. They benefit from the work of Rundle's son John, 35, himself a former Wimbledon ball boy.

"I must have just said to him, 'I wish there was some way I could help these kids sort out (learn the requirements),' she recalled. "He was at the stage where he went: 'Well, why don't you try this?'"

What John Rundle developed is a website where animated figures illustrate what's expected of ball kids.

"My IT is miles better than it used to be," Rundle said. In an additional bow to technology, her staff videotapes kids at work, then screens the tapes for them in a basement room beneath the Wimbledon Referee's Office.

At the U.S. Open, Cathie Delaney, head supervisor, monitors on-court behavior from a television set in an office at one side of Armstrong Stadium's grandstand court.

Last summer, Delaney spotted several ball kids acting too casually, she said. It disturbed her. She decided to warn them that this sent an unwanted signal to fans and viewers alike:

"You guys have to have a little bit more of — not the sense of urgency, as if you're frantic — but just like you're alive on the court," she told the assembled crews the next morning.

Standing above them in a section of seats sandwiched between Armstrong stadium and the grandstand court, Delaney pantomimed a lakkadaisical ball kid:



WAKE UP: Cathie Delaney used humor, pantomime to exhort U.S. Open ball kids to stay alert.

"You know, not like you're like, gee, 'ah, now take the ball, ah, Nadal, and I'll go back to my corner now, ah.'"

The kids laughed but drew the lesson: Look alert, move quickly, and stay focused.

At Roland Garros, there's nothing nonchalant about Ridha Bensalha's 300 *ballos* (ball kids).

A Tunisian-born tennis pro who took over the French operation 36 years ago, he said he created the first modern organization to train ball kids and has staged clinics to share his techniques in Key Biscayne and Montreal.

He has a reputation for toughness.

"Hard? I'm hard," he said. "The ball kids like this. You know, they do it because I must be hard with them. But I am not hard like the military. I enjoy being with them."

In the morning, Bensalha's ball kids shake off sleep and strengthen their *esprit*, he said, by singing:

*We are the ball kids,
We are the best in the world,
We are ready to help the players.*

The key, Bensalha said, is to attend to each player's special requirements.

"You must understand all that the player needs in the court; water, towels," he said. "If Federer needs this ball, you give him this ball. If Nadal needs this ball, you give him this ball. We work very hard about this."

Once on duty, ball kids the world over quickly discover that committing a gaff can draw unwanted attention.

"I learned I shouldn't have been a ball boy," said Mark Smith, a senior employee in Paris for Schlumberger, the worldwide oilfield services company. Growing up in California in the 1960s, Smith worked at a series of pro exhibitions. He came away embarrassed.

"My feet were too big, they flapped and made a sound. I could hear them against the court. People were looking."

At last year's U.S. Open, fans looked in disbelief at Steve Perry, a grey-haired 49-year-old communications cable tester from Manhattan. As

the oldest ball person on the roster, he drew applause.

“Everybody’s coming up to me and saying: ‘Wow, I can’t believe it. How old are you?’”

Perry and Maria Diegnan, 47, are senior poster children for the U.S. Open’s policy of no upper age limit (which is 12 to 15 years old in France and Australia, and 12 to 17 years old at Wimbledon).

A softball player, Diegnan earned a spot on the roster largely on her ability to throw the ball the length of the court and its enclosures.

In New York, ball kids throw overhand in the style of baseball players, a motion not permitted at the three rival championships, where they must roll the balls underhanded.

Perry, too, threw balls the full distance (about 100 feet), winning a position despite an exhausting off-court schedule. He worked nights for his employer in Manhattan, then drove to the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, where he slept in his car before reporting for duty.

On the job, he endured occasional displays of arrogance by the world’s top players.

“Some of them seem like they’re looking down on you, yeah. Like ‘take the ball and get outta here.’”

So what is the reward? For Perry, just two words: “Some say ‘thank you’ when they hand



RISING: A former ball boy, Dan Laufer, at Legg Mason Tennis Classic in Washington, DC. At 31, he manages all site operations and negotiates contracts each year with tournament’s suppliers.

you the balls or they hand you the towels. It feels good to be appreciated.”

The goal of many ball kids is to work the tournament finals. Not being chosen is an emotional blow, acknowledged Australia’s Hewatt.

“There is a bit of a disappointment,” she said, but insisted she encourages her charges to appreciate “what they’ve achieved.”

For one former American ball boy, it was a painful experience. “You had to accept rejection,” said Dan Laufer, who was 13 when he joined a team of ball boys and girls in Washington, DC in 1990.

“You don’t need a hundred kids for the final,” he said. “I got cut several times. And it was a huge disappointment.”

Still, Laufer recovered.

Today, at 31, after earning a university business degree and serving as a gofer and junior manager, Laufer has risen far above the ranks of ball boys. He is operations and facility manager for the Legg Mason Tennis Classic, a yearly tournament with a purse of \$1.3 million.

The young ball boy is now a young man negotiating contracts with the tournament’s vendors worth \$800,000.

“It (being a ball kid) teaches you that, you know, if you work harder,” Laufer said, “you can get to the next level.”

Seinfeld’s 1993 Satire of ‘Ball Man’ and the U.S. Open Reality Show

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld satirized adult ball boys in 1993.

Viewers saw Kramer, Seinfeld’s clumsy neighbor, attend a tryout and win a place among U.S. Open ball persons, only to dash onto center court and knock over Monica Seles in the women’s final.

In the stands, Seinfeld remarks: “Thus ends the great ball man experiment.” In real life, the experiment continues.



Steve Perry, 49



Maria Diegnan, 47

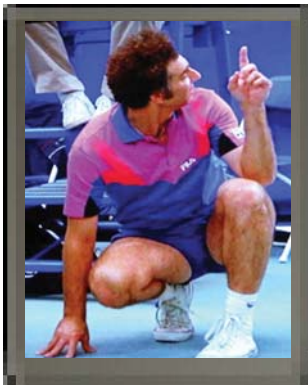
“I will not knock anyone over,” insisted Maria Diegnan, 47. She is a Florida housewife and mother of four who served at last year’s U.S. Open, enduring a 19-hour bus trip to attend her first tryout.

She said her brother teased her about the possibility of repeating Kramer’s blunder.

She was not worried:

“No, not at all,” she said, with a broad smile.

— J.M.



SATIRE: In 1993 Seinfeld episode, Kramer, left, earns position as a U.S. Open ball boy, then knocks down Monica Seles in women’s final, right. In stands, Seinfeld says “Thus ends the great ball man experiment.”