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World Tennis Gazette

Radio's Tennis Road Warrior

*How an Ex-U.S. College Player
Exploited His Love of the Sport
To Revive Lost Art for Listeners*

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By JOHN MARTIN
FLUSHING MEADOWS,
NY — Tennis fans did not see Ken Thomas at the 2012 United States Open.

A tanned, gray-haired man wearing a headset and microphone and sitting on a scaffold platform above Court 13, Thomas was a sideshow of his own during qualifying rounds at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center.

"They're both playing the big points well," he said into his microphone one day, "and they're not doing anything silly."

His play-by-play description of the match, between Shelby Rogers of the United States and Monique Adamczak of Australia, was being streamed on the Internet by his company, RadioTennis.com, to perhaps 1,500 tennis fans around the globe.

On September 24th, the final day of qualifying, after covering 18 matches in four days, Thomas packed his cables, audio board and two computers, and left the grounds. His one-week yearly contract with the U.S.T.A. was at an end for a fifth consecutive year.

Thomas's presence during the qualifying rounds is a testament to his enduring love affair with tennis and a revival of a relationship between tennis and radio that



John Martin for The New York Times

PLAY BY PLAYER: Ken Thomas calling match at Indian Wells tournament in Southern California.

first flourished more than 90 years ago.

Imagining a tennis match by listening to the sound of balls being struck, spectators applauding, and an announcer's description was a nearly lost experience before the advent of the Internet.

Now, a growing number of radio-style Webcasts have begun appearing around the four major international championships, the Australian, French and United States Opens and Wimbledon.

During the U.S. Open, a small army of announcers

and analysts described the action at Flushing Meadows to radio audiences in dozens of countries.

Thomas, 54, of Redondo Beach, Calif., took the week off, then returned to the road. In one 14-month period ending in May, he traveled more than 58,560 miles by car and airplane to describe

nearly 200 matches at a series of large and small tennis tournaments.

Thomas was a top junior in Michigan, a University of Wisconsin scholarship player, and fledgling professional player in the 1980s. After a brief fling on

the tour, he started working in marketing for an auto-maker. About 10 years ago, he began experimenting with Web casting and streaming commercials.

In 2003, he created RadioTennis.com, "just so it would give me some beer money, something when I retired."

Sponsored by several companies and tennis organizations, Thomas earns a living from advertising and fees paid by tournament directors, including U.S.T.A. officials, who use his webcast to publicize their events.

"We have 60,000 people in our database," he said. That figure comes from a list of subscribers to whom Thomas sends a daily e-mail during tournaments. It is headlined: "On Now."

"When I send that out, probably about, on the average about, 15,000 to 18,000 people open to read it," he said, adding, "I would say, every time I turn the switch on, I know a minimum of 1,500 people, a minimum," are listening.

"I try to paint a visual picture of the match and its surroundings for the listener," he said. "I want the listener to feel as if they're sitting next to me having a beer and sharing a good time."

Thomas's Webcasts are



The New York Times

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From Storeroom Perches to Stadium Booths, a Lone-Wolf Announcer

starkly different from those of his 1930s predecessors. NBC Radio played Beethoven. Thomas plays B.B. King.

Early announcers sometimes used stilted English. Summarizing a 1937 match at Forest Hills, a sports-writer, John R. Tunis, called it a "humdinger."

"They're chokin' like rats right now," Thomas said last year, analyzing a match between Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic. "

During the U.S. Open qualifying, Thomas told his listeners, "They go back to the baseline, and start grinding," his favorite word for long rallies

Suddenly, a technical glitch began devouring and spitting out Thomas's words, repeating his phrases in split-second loops: "The Aussie serving, the Aussie serving, to the American, to the American," his voice said.

When a listener reached him on his cellphone, Thomas coolly talked the caller into rebooting his computer and restoring the webcast to a single stream. Thomas's end of the conversation went out on the air for a few moments, then he turned back to his play-by-play description.



John Martin/World Tennis Gazette

PERCH: Ken Thomas calls play-by-play from inside a storage room at La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club.



"They're grinding," he repeated, as the players approached match point. Thomas paused, waiting for the final serve. "Return, down the line, there it is, game, set and match. Shelby Rogers, 7-6, 6-2, nice match."

Thomas's philosophy emerged one day last year in Niceville, Fla., where he was describing a \$10,000 men's professional challenger at Bluewater Bay.

Thomas began describing the work ethic of one of the players, Bassam Beidas of Lebanon, ranked 544th in the world.

"When they call his name to go on the court, he flicks the switch."

Beidas, Thomas said, plays hard. "If he wins, he wins; if he loses, he loses. Goes on to the next city, reads more books, practices and plays. That's what this guy does. He's a pro."

Ken Thomas is a pro. At the Pacific Coast Men's Doubles Championships a year ago, he found no space at courtside so he climbed to a storeroom overlooking the main court at the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club.

Peering out a window at the players, he carried his listeners through match point in the finals, then packed up and moved on. On the road again, a road warrior.

An Epic Broadcast of the 1937 Budge-Von Cramm Davis Cup Match

WIMBLEDON —Al Laney, an American newspaperman, was nervous.

Recruited in 1937 on short notice by NBC Radio to broadcast the United States Davis Cup matches against Germany, Laney said he felt trapped as he looked down on Centre Court at the All England Lawn Tennis Club.

"The thought that I would have to sit in a booth and speak into a

microphone all during a tennis match, or at any other time, terrified me."

As it happened, the

deciding match between Don Budge and Gottfried Von Cramm became so riveting that NBC produc-

ers in New York decided Laney's 15-minute updates were too brief.

Von Cramm, Germany's top player, stood on the verge of taking a two-set lead as Laney, a sports-writer for *The New York Herald-Tribune*, prepared to sign off, having run over his allotted time. Suddenly, a technician pushed a slip of paper into the booth.

It read: "New York says continue to end.

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Richard Osborn
Editor: John Martin

Two Weeks After The Budge-Von Cramm Match, An Epic Description

Programs cancelled.”

Laney's worst fear and wildest dream collided. Americans were tuning in across the continent and despite his stage fright, Laney was being given the task of describing one of the most remarkable matches in tennis history.

Budge's five-set victory electrified Americans mired in the Great Depression, helping expand radio's popularity and draw more tennis fans to radio sets.

One of the most memorable radio descriptions of the match came from Alistair Cooke, the British newspaperman whose "Letter from America" graced the BBC airwaves for decades. His account was broadcast in the United States two weeks afterward on WEA radio, the predecessor of WNBC Radio in New York, now known as WFAN. The description was so admired it appeared in *Vital Speeches of the Day* (Aug 4, 1937, Vol 3: Pg 661).

Under the title, "Oh Baby," it was headlined "German Baron v California Truck Driver's Son."

Cooke began with the shipping news: "The finest and most exciting understatement in the news of the day is a one-line entry on the back page of this morning's newspaper. It says, the 'Manhattan is due Thursday with mails from Great Britain and Irish Free State.' Classified as no more than an incoming male is a man who rates, next to Mark Twain, as the most popular redhead in American history.

"For the *Manhattan* brings back tomorrow morning a scrawny, hatchet-faced boy of twenty-two who will very likely be carrying, for the sake of the photographers, a silver cup which as an artistic hideosity is perhaps second only to the cup they are tacking and luffing and puffing for just now off the coast of Rhode Island.

"Donald Budge comes home tomorrow and he can hardly help bringing back that cup. But he brings back also a memory which is possibly the best satisfaction he will know as long as he lives, the satisfaction of knowing, along with the two or three thousand English, Americans, and Germans who saw it, that he played in the greatest match in the history of tennis. And he won it.

"There are other reasons too why this thin, amiable boy from California is today a true hero and a good ambassador. But before we go into them, we must skip



WSJ.com

RADIO STARS: Von Cramm, left, and Budge drew listeners to their epic five-set match at Wimbledon.

arch, 'seen a match that came nearer the heroic.' And his New York brother came out with a fighting sentence that gets more remarkable the more you read it over. 'Donald Budge defeated Baron Gottfried Von Cramm today in a match which will be forever memorable in every land where lawn-tennis is played.'

"Yet there was more to the write-ups of the game than rhetoric. And piecing three or four of these long and inspired accounts together we can get a pretty vivid peek into the events of Tuesday, July the 20th.

"Before a packed and happy Wimbledon crowd -- it always has something of the clean excitability of a Sunday School picnic-- Heinrich Henkel had done what most of the experts had expected. He had defeated Bitsy Grant, of Atlanta, in four sets, and thereby turned the coming match, between Von Cramm and Budge into the match for the Davis Cup. For the score was Germany 2, United States 2, and whichever of them went

into the challenge round was almost certain to come out the winner.

"So the crowd leaned forward on its knees, and the ball boys, in their neat white sneakers stood on their toes behind the lines, aware that though they were only five feet one, they were playing their part in the fate of nations.

"Von Cramm is always a smiler, a dashing smooth-haired young German baron, sure of himself socially and physically, and therefore able to be pleasant and quick-mannered. Two years ago I saw him play for the first time this same rangy redhead who was now loping across to his side of the court. They looked as different as it seems possible that two civilizations could look and still both claim to be white men. (sic)

"Von Cram netted a serve then served a humdinger



Alistair Cooke

At Moment of Victory, a Shout of 'Oh, Baby!' from America's Budge

which hit the chalk-line. Budge assumed it was in and tightened his belt. But the umpire, to everybody's surprise, gave the point to Budge. Next time Budge served, his ball hit the chalk-line and the umpire called it out. Von Cramm walked smartly across the court, appealed to the umpire and called in the evidence of the side-line umpire. The point was given to Budge, who looked bewildered while Von Cramm smiled, and walking back bowed quickly to Budge, giving a quick glitter to the gesture. Budge stood there, his feet apart, shaking his long red head. He ambled over at the end of the game ready to receive Von Cramm's serve. Again it sizzled at the chalk-line and again the umpire paused -- but Budge was already moving across to receive the next point.

"The umpire looked for help to the men on the side-lines, the Baron moved hesitatingly towards the net, but the point was given decisively in Von Cramm's favor by Budge who raised his racket and his voice high and grinned at Von Cramm: -- 'that was all right!' The players laughed and the crowd applauded Budge until a nettled umpire shouted he was ready to get on with the game.

"When the two men left the court, Budge was slowing up at the gate, the Baron ran forward, opened it and stood still until Budge had gone through first. The Wimbledon crowd has not forgotten that day when a German baron and a California truck-driver's son both played two styles of tennis and two styles of good manners. If the Davis Cup could not be won by a single Englishman, here were the only other two men they'd as soon see instead.

"Well, good manners are forgotten about when good looks remain. And every year that Gottfried Von Cramm steps onto the center court at Wimbledon, a few hundred young women sit a little straighter and forget about their escorts. He is what the movies would like to turn Frank Shields into. And when he appeared two weeks ago, the crowd cheered the man they picked as the winner. Von Cramm returned the compliment by starting in to play the finest tennis of his life. He let loose a cannonball, the German's hair flashed, and it was an ace for Germany.

"Budge's backhand pulled back balls that seemed already to have whizzed into the stands but Von Cramm was there, swift, accurate, and smooth as a whippet. Budge's forehand faltered. And Walter Pate, America's non-playing captain, who sat out there, in the shadow of the umpire's chair, began to stroke his chin and cross and re-cross his legs.

"Across three thousand miles of sea, men drinking highballs, watching a tape, nearly choked when the news came through--first set to Von Cramm -- second set to Von Cramm. Walter Pate at this point did something more desperate than choke over a highball. He decided on the English form of suicide. He ordered himself some tea. He sipped it there and got back the composure he was pretending to when Budge won the third set.

"Walter Pate, it is now common knowledge, actually began to enjoy his tea when Budge, playing just a shade more perfectly than the demi-god Von Cramm, took the fourth set. The crowd could lean back for the first time before the final set. It looked like Von Cramm's match. Every tactic he had used against Budge before had come off brilliantly in the first two sets, playing for position till he could flatter Budge's backhand and then flash up to the net and volley a clean two yards away from Budge. But the loping Budge was by the fifth set a lean and anxious tiger wearing a mask called Donald Budge.

"The match now turned into a perfect exhibition game, each man sure-footed, playing his favorite strokes in his own time, and the two white figures began to set the rhythms of something that looked more like ballet than a game where you hit the ball.

The first three games went with service and the fourth game saw Budge ready to equalize the score.

"But Von Cramm, for that one game, looked the best player in the world, and to the women spectators the handsomest man there has ever been. He crept in and in to Budge's serve, with perfect timing dared to half-volley the Budge cannon-ball. When Budge breathed down and strained himself for the hardest serve he has ever delivered, Von Cramm was already lifting back for a forehand that pounded the Budge bullet back for an ace. It was, it looked, all over. Von Cramm leading 3-1.

"Being a gentleman to the strings of his racket, Von Cramm did not demonstrate his coolness, as happens all the times in these cases, by bouncing the balls calmly while the opponent prepares to die. He

stood there at attention, waiting for Budge's cue. He nodded and Von Cramm served a low sizzler to some midget's forehand. 15-love. He crossed, served again, a rising ball that left the Californian standing. It was at this split second that another cry broke from Budge such as had cheered the English crowd two years before. Budge saw his dearest hope practically down the drain. The English crowd was solidly behind the German. Budge played at this last serve, was a mile out, but rose to the skill of it and shouted "Oh Baby!" The English papers next day put that cry on record as the cry of a sportsman."

Within two decades, television eclipsed radio so completely that few of today's fans have experienced what it is like to listen to a play-by-play account of a tennis match without images on a screen. — J.M.

— Special thanks to U.S. Library of Congress and the Butler Library at Columbia University.



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LINK: A 1930s microphone at the U.S. Library of Congress.