

Wimbledon: lawns look lovely, but time to keep off the grass

July 8 2019, by John William Devine

The 133rd Wimbledon tennis championships are in full swing and, in time-honoured British tradition, the nation is fixated on seedings, scorelines, and strawberries and cream. While The Championships have been modernised with the introduction of Hawk-eye line-calling technology and the installation of retractable roofs on Centre Court and No. 1 Court, they remain firmly traditional with the grass playing surface.

Perhaps this is unsurprising, for the sport that we know as "tennis" was historically called "lawn tennis" to distinguish it from the older sport of "real tennis" which was played indoors. So it seems natural for Wimbledon—the premier event in lawn tennis—to be played on lawn courts.

As fitting as this sounds, the arrangement is anomalous—lawn tennis is no longer a lawn sport. Grass courts constitute only a tiny proportion of the world's tennis courts, as the sport is now played on clay and synthetic surfaces. With [grass](#) courts nearly extinct beyond SW19, should Wimbledon still be played on grass?

The appeal of grass

Dating back to 1877, Wimbledon is the oldest tennis tournament in the world, and the organising committee makes great efforts to honour and respect the sport's [history and traditions](#). Reverence for the past is

evident in the all-white player dress code, the absence of sponsor hoardings on the [court](#), and—most significantly—the [retention of grass courts](#).

Aside from tradition, the lawns contribute to a unique garden party aesthetic (particularly around the outside courts). The players' brilliant white attire contrasts with the lush green grass to provide one of the iconic images of the British summer—and, indeed, of the sporting world.

But are tradition and aesthetics enough? I do not suggest that grass is inappropriate for tennis per se – but it is inappropriate for the sport's flagship event. Surface selection should be based on three principal considerations: the welfare of players, continuity with the global tennis community, and the showcasing of tennis at its best. Grass courts fall short on each.

1. Player welfare

Court surfaces should not pose an unnecessary risk to the well-being of players. But grass courts carry an inherent danger of [slips](#) and [falls](#). As a natural surface, grass is not uniform. There are hard and soft patches, wet and dry patches and, as a result, slippery and non-slippery patches. In shaded parts of the court and in areas away from the baseline and sidelines, footing tends to be especially precarious and, as the evening draws in, the whole court can become dewy.

So the prospect of losing one's footing, turning one's ankle, or falling flat on one's face is [ever present](#). This is a needless risk.

2. Level playing fields

While the International Tennis Federation (ITF) does not yet have data

on how many grass courts exist, grass courts of an acceptable standard are rare indeed. [Grass has become a niche surface](#), because it requires year-round maintenance and deteriorates to the point of being unplayable after only four months of intensive use. As grass courts can be used only during late spring and summer due to the vagaries of the British climate, land devoted to grass courts is unusable for eight months a year. While this might be financially viable for the All England Club, the same is not true for the average tennis club or public park.

In the design of any sport, there should also be a high degree of continuity between the basic playing conditions at the elite and recreational levels. The size of the playing area, the equipment used, and the surface on which the sport is played should not differ markedly across different levels of the game. Fans should be able to recognise in elite competition something of what they experience in the sport—but the vast majority of tennis players will never have the opportunity to play on a grass court.

One might object that, because Wimbledon is the premier tournament in the sport, its organisers should be free to use whatever surface they wish. But it's precisely because this is the most important tournament that it should not be played on grass. The sport's leading event should represent how the sport is played—not how it used to be played.

3. Showcasing tennis at its best

Grass courts do not show modern tennis at its best. Wimbledon is contested in conditions in which players do not typically train or compete. There are [only eight grass court tournaments](#) on the men's ATP Tour and [only six](#) on the women's WTA Tour. Players compete usually in a maximum of two warm up tournaments prior to Wimbledon.

Once Wimbledon has concluded, the North American hard court season

begins and most players will not set foot on a grass court until the following June. With the [grass court season being so short](#), most players have to modify their normal game to play on grass.

Grass also inhibits the display of the modern player's athleticism. Tennis has evolved from a sport that placed a premium on racket skills to one where [athletic prowess predominates](#). The explosive speed and agility of modern players are obscured on a surface where any sudden change of direction poses a risk. As a result, players must be conservative in their movement.

Finally, while on day one, the lawns of SW19 are the envy of horticulturalists everywhere, the courts begin to deteriorate as soon as the first match has commenced. As the surface deteriorates, the bounce becomes [less predictable](#) and luck enters the frame ever more.

Wimbledon should showcase tennis at its best. But what we see in Wimbledon are not players at their best, but players making the best of an unfamiliar and unpredictable surface.

Time to move on

A sport should honour its history, but it should not be hamstrung by it. Grass court tennis is an anachronism—a sentimental nod to the past but not a choice surface for the sport's flagship event. The use of this [surface](#) is needlessly risky, it is out of step with the modern tennis world, and it does not showcase the modern [tennis](#) athlete.

It would be extraordinary if Wimbledon still insisted on players using wooden rackets, because racket technology has moved on and the sport is better for it. In this respect, what is true of rackets is also true of courts.

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