



1957

A Father's Day Tribute By Chris Merrill

It was the summer of 1957, and kids were out playing with the new high-tech flying device from Wham-O called the Frisbee! Chevrolet was trying to keep up with production of its latest release...the 57' Chevy, and Elvis was settling into his new home at Graceland. But all eyes turned towards England in late June to see if the world's #1 tennis player would capture the title at the All England Club and become the first black tennis player to hoist the Wimbledon trophy.

In 1956, Althea Gibson had become the first African American tennis player to win a Grand Slam title, by winning the French Open in Paris. Althea's graceful style and athleticism made her the one to watch at the 1957 Wimbledon Championships. The energy surrounding the tournament was electric, as this year's tournament was destined to be remembered for many years to come.

While Althea was getting the headlines in her quest for tennis' most coveted title, there were many other players at the Championships fulfilling their dreams of playing on the historic lawns just southwest of London. One of those players was Robert Vincent Sherman, an American from Alhambra, California, who at the age of 37 was making his Wimbledon debut. Sherman, an extremely talented athlete who had been a track and field star, and former professional basketball player, had just picked up tennis at the advanced age of 30. Now just 7 years later, he was playing on the sport's biggest stage. But with the big names of tennis filling the main show courts, Sherman was locked into a battle on one of the outer courts with British hopeful, and future International Tennis Hall of Fame member, John Barrett.

As could be expected the largely partisan crowd was overflowing the area surrounding the court, letting it be known that they want to see the British #5 player advance to the second round. But what unfolded that afternoon was not exactly what the crowd had expected. It seemed that this older bloke from the colonies was holding his own against the 25 year old Barrett. This was not going to be a walk in the park!

Sherman, who had made his way through the qualifying tournament, was off to a good start by winning the first set 6-4. Once described as a gazelle with tennis shoes and a

racquet, the nimble Sherman was all over the net with his serve and volley assault. The pro-Barrett crowd was perplexed as they witnessed the events unfold on court. This Sherman guy was not the villain they had hoped for. He seemed to relish the opportunity to interact with the crowd, and seemed to carry on a continuous dialogue with both himself and anyone in attendance who was willing to take up the conversation.

The second set was a topsy-turvy affair, as both players dug in for a battle. With the score knotted at 10 games all in the set, Sherman caught Barrett off guard with his patented "popcorn" shot, which is similar to today's "tweener," hit with back towards the net. In this case, the miracle shot produced the only break of the set, which allowed Sherman to hold serve in the following game to take the set 12-10. Sherman now led 2 sets to love, but nobody was moving from their seats. In fact, more seemed to fill in any space available.

A somewhat dejected Barrett continued to hope that he would find a way past the hard charging Sherman. Lifted by the supportive crowd, Barrett found his chance with Sherman serving at 5-6. On break point, the tennis gods seemed to smile down on the British player as his service return clipped the top of the soft net and rolled over on Sherman's side without a reply. Barrett claimed the third set 7 games to 5. Word had spread around the grounds that an epic battle was taking place. The crowd continued to get even bigger and louder!

Early in the fourth set, Barrett, now brimming with confidence, began to show why he was one of Britain's top hopes for going deep into the event. He broke Sherman's serve early on in the set and held out to win the fourth set 6-3, to even the match at 2 sets all. The hour was now late, even by London summer standards. So most spectators remaining on the grounds had huddled around the Sherman v Barrett match in the fading light.



The famous Wimbledon Queue, as spectators wait to be allowed on the grounds.

Meanwhile, Althea Gibson was resting comfortably, preparing for her upcoming match the next day. Trying to stay fresh and focused on the task in front of her she wasn't aware of the epic struggle still taking place on the outer courts of Wimbledon. She always made a point to follow the results of her fellow Americans, so would check the draw closely the next morning.

As the fifth and final set got underway, it was clear that Sherman was struggling. This 37 year old Gazelle was now beginning to show his age against the much younger Brit. But adversity was not something that Robert V. Sherman had shied away from during his life. In fact, he had found a way to deal with the most difficult situations with a smile and a sense of humor.

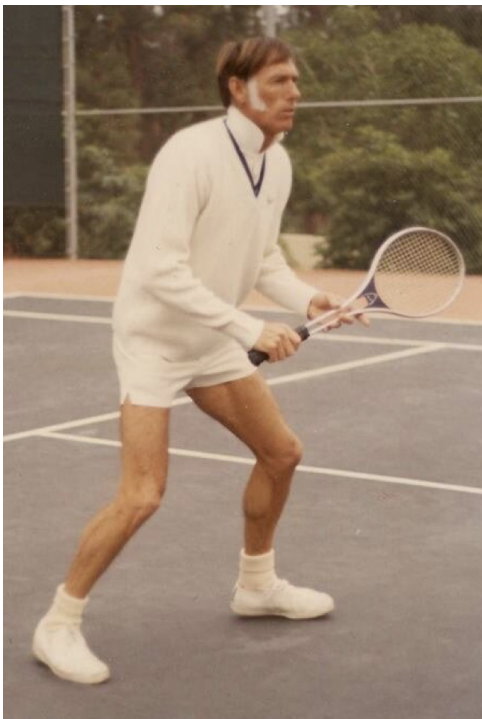
Robert was the youngest of three children in the Sherman household, living in the Los Angeles area. His father was a rug maker who was a strict task master when it came to dealing with his children. Young Robert seemed to be impervious to the pressures of growing up during that challenging time. The Great Depression hit when Sherman was just 9 years old. Without a "pot to piss in," the Sherman family made due with what they had, with the youngest member of the family spending most of his time playing any sport he could.

The conversation with himself and the British crowd had now been going on for nearly 5 hours, as play continued into the fifth set. The once lopsided crowd was now remarkably cheering on both players! It was clear at this point that the American had given everything he had to this point, so the crowd was showing their respect in the only way they could. They now saw that the nearly forty year old was living out his dream of competing in the most important tournament in the sport, and compete he surely did!

Both the remaining daylight and the final set went fairly quick, as it was nearly dark by the time Barrett prevailed 6-1. As the players embraced at the net and the large crowd stood in full appreciation of both athletes, Robert V. Sherman was already planning his next move. Never one to focus on a loss, he was thinking about the summer ahead. As a school teacher, his summers were now spent traveling the planet in search of tennis tournaments. His young tennis career was just beginning.

As June stretched into July the once green grass courts had now turned brown. Althea Gibson made history by besting Darlene Hard for the Women's Championship. The very next day, in an all-Australian men's final, Lew Hoad beat Ashley Cooper for the title. That same day, July 6, 1957 in nearby Liverpool, Paul McCartney met John Lennon for the first time. But that's another story...

John Barrett could not recover from his first round battle, and lost his next match to future legend Roy Emerson. In total, John competed at Wimbledon for 18 years and became the sports top historian, entering the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 2014.



The Sherm and his famous white sideburns! Circa 1970's

As for Robert V. Sherman, he qualified again for the Wimbledon main draw two years later at the age of 39, this time losing yet another epic battle of over 5 hours, losing to Alan Bailey of Australia 8-6 in the fifth set! But once again, Sherman was looking to the future. And what a bright future it would be. Before his tennis career was over, The Sherm would end up winning more U.S. National Championships than any male tennis player ever...EVER! 125 national titles. Not bad for a track running, basketball scoring, school teacher who took up tennis at 30.

Ten years after his epic battle with John Barrett, Robert V. Sherman married my mom...I was 5 years old. Many of the details of their match reported in this story are based upon watching the Sherm play tennis for many years. He was never one to talk

about past matches...always moving forward. So, we never really talked about the match. If he were alive today, I would love to hear him talk about his match and his life back in the summer of 1957.

This past January would have been the Sherm's 103rd birthday. He passed away a few weeks shy of his 97th birthday, but was still on the tennis court up to the very end. We had our last hit just a month before he died, during our Thanksgiving holiday visit. As always, he was still enjoying his time on the court. Still encouraging my own play, and wanting to know about my next tournament. Typical...always looking forward! ■



The teacher and the student!