

2017 Cockram Cup

By Bill Barker

The Cockram Cup for players 50 and older has been played for years by teams from the United States, Great Britain and Australia. The 2017 event, played in Melbourne, January 21-23 was the inaugural edition with a French team as well, and ended up being a highly competitive tournament with a lot of suspense going into the final day.

The U.S. was represented by many different clubs as the lineup included Cockram veterans Steve Hufford (DC), Alan McHugh (Tuxedo), Peter Vogt (Philadelphia), Anders Cohen (Lakewood, Philadelphia and a few others), and Bill Barker (DC) who served as captain. They were joined by rookies Max Drake (Chicago) and Arthur Whitcomb (NY).

The format for this year's Cockram was again round robin, and with the edition of the French team made for three consecutive days of play. The first day saw the U.S. up against the host Australian team on Melbourne's North court, while the British played the French on the South court.

Although the host team always has an advantage in having all or most of its top players available for the event, the Australians took it a little easy on the U.S. by giving Mike Happell, a 4 handicap veteran of many Bathurst teams, the day off. This provided only the slightest opening to the U.S., and while the U.S. came up short at the end, the Australians had to sweat it out for a bit.

The first match of the day saw Peter Vogt and Arthur Whitcomb lose in straight sets to a tough team of Melbourne club president Fred Kininmonth and Jon Emery. Next up, Steve Hufford was to provide the match of the day against Graeme Bradfield, head of the Australian Real Tennis Association, who had just the day before lost in the finals of both the 50 and 55 doubles in the World Masters tournament that immediately preceded the Cockram Trophy. After losing the first set 6/5, Steve rallied to take the second 6/4, finishing the set with a perfect force. The final set went back and forth, 2/2, then 3/3, 4/4, and finally 5-all. The first six match points in the deciding and final game were split evenly with Hufford and Bradfield each saving three. Alas, the seventh match point went to Bradfield and the Australians, and Steve's reward for putting more than two hours on the court was to immediately board a train with Peter Vogt and head to Ballarat for their match later that afternoon in the Bostwick Cup. (More on that in the Bostwick write-up).

19-time British Amateur singles champ (along with four British Opens and two U.S. Opens) Julian Snow, captain of the Australian team, made quick work of Bill Barker, 6/0, 6/0, and the Australians had secured a team victory with a 3-0 match lead. The U.S. did not give up though, as Alan McHugh extended Richard Allen 6/4,5/6,6/2. Then, despite being three point handicap underdogs and on their opponents home court as well, Max Drake and Anders Cohen provided the U.S. with its sole victory for the day. They got stronger and stronger as the match went on, winning 6/3 in the third over Andrew Gould, and tournament chair Henry Turnbull.

Meanwhile, on the other court, a very strong British team never lost a set in taking the French down 5-0.

Day two saw the U.S. playing the British, and, spoiler alert, the U.S. didn't do any better than the French had the day before, losing ten straight sets. The results were:

James Male over Bill Barker 6/1, 6/4

Simon Barker over Max Drake 6/0, 6/0

Nick Jones over Arthur Whitcomb 6/2, 6/2

David Watson/John Prens over Alan McHugh/Anders Cohen 6/0, 6/2

Nick Jones/Peter Holmes over Steve Hufford/Peter Vogt 6/2, 6/1

The Australian team was nearly as comprehensive against the French, taking a relatively easy 4-1 victory, and not losing a set outside of the first doubles match, which the French had strategically and successfully targeted as the place they most likely could take a victory with the lineup they used.

Day 3 was the one everyone had been waiting for. The U.S. and French were each seeking their first team victories, and the Brits and Aussies took over the show court for the day for the deciding matches.

The U.S. and French looked on paper to be closely matched, and that is how it played out for the most part on the court. Though the U.S. took the match 5-0, it included two long three-set battles.

First up, Steve Hufford and Arthur Whitcomb played extremely well in prevailing 6/3, 6/0 over the French team's strongest player Tim Batten and his partner for the day Alexandre Girod. This was a dead even match by handicap, but, on this day at least, not on the court.

Next Anders Cohen played for over two and a half hours, coming back from down a set to ultimately win 4/6, 6/4, 6/3 over the delightfully enthusiastic and hard-hitting French captain, Ivan Semenov. Next, Bill Barker, partially aided by a mid-match injury to his opponent won 6/1, 6/1 to secure the victory for Team America.

Plenty of tennis remained on the court, as Alan McHugh, like Anders Cohen before him, dropped the first set, but stuck it out to win. Adding good length and placement toward the end of the match to the flurry of boasts and forces that he used throughout, Alan won 5/6, 6/2, 6/4 over Jean-Phillippe Grabli. Finally, Peter Vogt helped Max Drake to his second victory in three days, as the Americans eked out a 6/5, 6/3 win over Francois Bernheim and captain Semenov, who was forced into double duty for the day as the French travelled with six players instead of seven. Semenov could not be blamed if he tired toward the end of the match, having earlier had the long singles match against Anders Cohen earlier in the day.

Meanwhile, the Australian and British match was largely decided at the #1 singles spot (the third match played in the Cockram order), where mates James Male and Michael Happell delighted the crowd for hours with a 6/5 third-set thriller. Although it was Male who prevailed, it was as close a match as possible, essentially decided by who was on the service side of the net at the very end, after multiple momentum swings. The British ended up winning 4-1 overall, retaining the Cockram Trophy for the next two years.

A phenomenal job was done by the Melbourne club and all of the Australians involved in hosting the bi-annual event, and the United States will have its work cut out for it with that difficult act to follow when the four international teams arrive here, as the United States is next in line to host. All involved look forward to meeting again and renewing both rivalries and friendships on and off the court in 2019.