

# FRED PERRY

# BRITISH TENNIS LEGEND



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# Introduction: ‘Perry is not a popular champion at home’

**A**LL looked set fair on the afternoon of Friday 6 July 1934 for a famous British sporting triumph. In front of the packed stands on Wimbledon’s Centre Court, Fred Perry played some dazzling tennis in his attempt to become the first home player to take the men’s singles title since 1909.

Although his Australian opponent, the defending champion Jack Crawford, took an early lead in the opening set, Perry entered into what the later American Wimbledon winner Arthur Ashe described as one of those ‘serene highs’ that tennis players occasionally experience: a period of sustained, almost unplayable brilliance.

The Englishman claimed 12 games in succession as his virtually error-free serving, volleying and ground

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strokes swept him to a 6-3, 6-0 advantage; Crawford managed just a meagre eight points in the second set. The third set was closer, but after little more than an hour's play Perry was victorious. He did a cartwheel to celebrate his straight-sets win, followed by a trademark leap over the net to shake his opponent's hand.

Even in the pre-television age, there were plenty of court-side photographers on hand to ensure that newspaper images of the athletic young champion would be recognisable around the world.

The American Jack Kramer, another post-war Wimbledon winner, wrote in his memoirs about the glamour associated with the sport when he was growing up in the 1930s, 'If you never saw tennis players in their long white flannels, I cannot begin to explain to you how majestic they appeared.'

With film-star good looks and slicked-back hair, the imposing young Englishman illustrated Kramer's point more than most. 'Fred Perry in a linen shirt, matching pants, everything tailored: there was never a champion in any sport who looked more like a champion than Fred Perry.'<sup>1</sup>

Yet beneath the surface, something was amiss on that warm July afternoon. In part this was because the last point of the contest was an anti-climax; Crawford's reign as champion ended with the indignity of serving a double fault. Fred Burrow, the referee of the tournament, reflected that this 'had the unfortunate effect of

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depriving the winner of a great deal of the applause he most certainly ought to have received... The stands were too stupefied at the sudden and unfortunate finish to give Perry... a proper tribute'.<sup>2</sup>

But the muted response of the 15,000-strong crowd was not simply the result of a tame finish to the match. Centre Court spectators were not always averse to greeting new champions with gusto. Twenty-four hours after Perry's win, Worcestershire's Dorothy Round made it a British double by winning a thrilling women's final. According to one close observer of the tennis scene, Teddy Tinling, who was present on both days, 'The crowd were roused to a far greater pitch of excitement than that which had greeted Perry's victory.' There were 'deafening cheers' from all sides, said Tinling, and even King George V and Queen Mary, attending to support Miss Round, 'seemed quite overwhelmed'.<sup>3</sup>

The reality was that many of the onlookers were underwhelmed by what they witnessed on 6 July. Throughout the Perry–Crawford encounter, not simply at the end, the atmosphere was subdued. 'For a Wimbledon final,' noted the match report in *The Times*, 'there was a strange lack of excitement in the crowded galleries'.<sup>4</sup> What the role of the crowd during and at the end of the match implied was that, in spite of his striking physical appearance and his claim to have become the best player in the world, there was little instinctive rapport between Perry and his audience.

Remarkably, in view of the long years since 1909 without British men's success at Wimbledon, there appeared to be warmer support for the vanquished than the victor. According to a reporter from the Associated Press, Crawford received greater applause for his endeavours than Perry.

Confirmation that more was at work than British sympathy for a gallant loser came a week later. In its review of the tournament the official mouthpiece of the game's governing body in Britain, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), described Perry's win as the finest individual achievement by an Englishman since the Great War. But it also adopted an unmistakably jarring tone, 'Frankly many of us had not believed that Perry had such tennis in him... In spite of his defeat much of the honours of the 1934 Championship Meeting must go to J. H. Crawford.'<sup>5</sup>

The new champion would not have been surprised by this account, for within half an hour of coming off court after the final he experienced at first hand the frostiness of some sections of the British tennis establishment towards his victory. In the days of unpaid amateur competition, when the reward for winning Wimbledon was not a sizeable cheque but a replica trophy, a medal, a shopping voucher valued at £25 and a gold laurel wreath embroidered on a silk ribbon, there were no on-court presentation ceremonies. Instead it was the custom to offer congratulations in the changing rooms.

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Perry was greeted by family and friends coming off court, but as he settled into the bath to soak and recover from his exertions, he overheard a Wimbledon committee member, Brame Hillyard, offering congratulations to Jack Crawford and saying, 'This was one day when the best man didn't win.'

It was an incident that still rankled with Perry when he published his autobiography 50 years later. He couldn't believe his ears, he recalled, adding that he immediately jumped out of the bath to find that Crawford had been given a bottle of champagne. The traditional tie, also offered to Wimbledon champions to signify membership of the prestigious All England Club (AEC), was left unceremoniously on the back of a chair for Perry to collect. 'I don't think I've ever been so angry in my life,' he wrote. 'Instead of Fred J. Perry the champ, I felt like Fred J. Muggs the chimp. The Perry balloon was certainly deflated.'<sup>6</sup>

It may have been the case that Perry embellished, or according to some possibly even fabricated, the oft-repeated story of what was said in the dressing rooms; a few instances of faulty memory in his 1984 memoirs have recently been highlighted.<sup>7</sup>

At the time, the new champion certainly perked up sufficiently to enjoy evening and overnight celebrations following his victory, including dinner at the Savoy hotel in London before hitting the party trail. Almost without sleep, he returned to Wimbledon the following day, where

he and Dorothy Round – following her singles victory – were presented to the King and Queen. But in spite of the cheers that accompanied the two champions as they made their way to the royal box, there was no doubt that winning Wimbledon was a bittersweet experience for Perry. It took several days, and a threat not to represent his country in a forthcoming international tie, for him to receive an apology for what transpired in the dressing room after the men's final. In spite of the smiles to camera and the handshakes of congratulation, it was obvious that tensions lingered.

What, then, was the explanation for Perry's ambivalent relationship with the Wimbledon crowds and the British tennis authorities? A large body of evidence (to be outlined in the following chapters) points to a protracted and complex tale of mutual mistrust. Although Perry may have exaggerated certain details in his later reflections, the thrust of his argument, and his enduring sense of grievance about how he was treated by the powers-that-be, was strikingly clear-cut.

In his 1984 memoirs Perry summed up his side of the story by citing an American writer, John R. Tunis, who observed in a 1934 article for *Esquire* magazine that 'Wimbledon is the most snobbish centre of sport in the world'. The members of the All-England Club, it was claimed, seemed resentful that the revival of British men's tennis after a long period in the doldrums had been spearheaded by a player without a traditional

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public school, university-educated background. The uncomfortable truth, according to John Tunis, was that despite his great triumph, ‘Perry is not a popular champion at home.’<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

Fred Perry went on to achieve considerable fame and – later on in his life – fortune. His Wimbledon victory in 1934 was the first of three successive triumphs in London SW19, and until the end of 1936 he remained the undisputed world number one in the amateur game. In addition to Wimbledon, he won the national championships of Australia, France and (on three occasions) the United States, making him the first player to claim all four ‘grand slam’ titles, though not in the same calendar year: that honour was taken by Donald Budge in 1938.

As well as eight major singles titles, like many other top players of his era he played tournament doubles to keep himself sharp, and he won the French and Australian men’s titles as well as claiming four mixed doubles triumphs – a combined total of 14 top-level successes. He also played the lead role in Britain’s domination of the premier international competition in tennis, the Davis Cup, which was won on four successive occasions between 1933 and 1936. And after he left amateur tennis, he additionally claimed two prestigious US Pro titles, in 1938 and 1941.

All in all, Perry's record was remarkable. Only in the very recent past, with the rise of Andy Murray to world number one, has a British man come close to matching – some would say exceeding, in view of the depth of opposition and ferocity of men's tennis today – the scale of Perry's achievements. The long wait for another home-grown male winner at Wimbledon lasted for 77 years, until 2013 witnessed the first of two triumphs for Murray (who at the time of writing has a total of three grand slam titles to his name). As for the national team, it was even longer, in 2015, before Britain – inspired by the performances of Murray and his brother Jamie – once again claimed the Davis Cup. Fifty years on from the 1934 Wimbledon final, in a survey of 2,000 people carried out by the British Market Research Bureau aimed at finding the 'Best of the Best' British sportsmen of the 20th century, it was no surprise that Perry was the only tennis player on the list. The same applied when in 2007 *Observer* journalist Jon Henderson published a book of *Sporting Heroes*, a celebration of the nation's 100 greatest sports men and women of all time.<sup>9</sup>

This book sets out to examine afresh the life and career of Fred Perry, and in particular to explore the issue of why – despite building up a reputation in the 1930s as one of the first modern-style global sports celebrities – acclaim for him was not readily evident among the tennis authorities in Britain, either in his prime playing days or for many years afterwards. In spite of his status

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as one of the best players in tennis history, only one full-length biography of Perry has so far appeared: Jon Henderson's book was published in 2009 to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of Fred's birth.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Perry remains understudied.

In an age when sporting biographies are plentiful, today's generation of leading players is much better served. In the case of Andy Murray, whose career is yet to be complete, several biographical accounts by journalists have already appeared, alongside three separate works of autobiographical reflections. One of the latter adopts a title – *Seventy-Seven* – that explicitly alludes to Murray at last providing a British Wimbledon winner in succession to Perry.<sup>11</sup>

As tennis correspondent of *The Observer*, Jon Henderson brings enormous knowledge to the subject matter of his biography and carefully outlines the main phases in Perry's playing career: his meteoric rise in the early 1930s; his capturing of eight grand slam singles titles; his role in helping Britain to win the prestigious Davis Cup on four successive occasions; and his decision to cash in on his fame by turning professional in 1936. Henderson's book is also strong in outlining what he calls Fred's 'romantic entanglements' with Hollywood actresses on his regular trips to the USA in the 1930s and in relationships which resulted in four marriages. What follows, in this new study, differs from Henderson's biography in a few key respects.

*Fred Perry: British Tennis Legend*, as a shorter work, focuses less on affairs of the heart and the detail of individual grand slam and Davis Cup matches (especially those in the early rounds of tournaments) and more on the social and political background that contextualises and illuminates Perry's career. In addition, by way of contrast, more attention is given here to the rights and wrongs of Perry's ongoing battles with the tennis authorities, and also to key incidents of good fortune that were crucial in facilitating his rise to the pinnacle of the world game. Three stand-out moments in particular, discussed though not emphasised in Henderson's book, will be highlighted in the chapters that follow.

*British Tennis Legend* also attempts, notably in the conclusion, to weigh up more fully Perry's enduring place among the greats of the sport.

The main concern of this new biography is therefore to provide a concise, up-to-date and thoroughly researched study of Britain's most successful player of the 20th century, bringing to life his strong personality – part charmer, part blunt egoist – and above all seeking to cast fresh light on why it was that, despite his record, full acceptance and recognition of Perry in the stuffy world of British tennis remained elusive for much of his life.

Simmering resentments, so evident at the time of Fred's first Wimbledon success, continued until at the end of 1936 he left the amateur game to live and work in the United States. By joining the small professional tennis

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circuit there, he started to earn considerable sums of money, but as a consequence was instantly banned from the world's top amateur events, including Wimbledon and the Davis Cup. In an age when professionalism was regarded as anathema by the game's governing bodies, Perry was promptly relieved of his honorary membership of the All England Club, and the tie that came with it. 'And after all the trouble they'd gone to presenting it to me,' he commented acidly in his memoirs.<sup>12</sup>

His troubled relationship with the powers-that-be and the manner of his exile ensured there was no enduring Perry legacy for British tennis. The LTA made little effort to build lasting success on the back of his triumphs. For many years after 1936 relations were frosty as Perry built a new life in the USA, which he found much less hidebound about social distinctions than Britain. His name remained well known throughout the world (and his bank balance healthy) following the success of the Fred Perry sportswear label, and relations with the AEC and the LTA slowly improved as the years passed with no British man to emulate his success on the world stage.

Even so, Perry was an elderly figure of 75, and pay-for-play 'open' tennis was well established, before reconciliation with the British tennis establishment was complete. The unveiling of a statue of the three-time champion at Wimbledon in 1984 was a well-intentioned and warmly appreciated gesture, but as one later obituary of Perry noted, it also drew attention to the 'embarrassing

length of time' which had elapsed since Britain had a player of his capability. It had taken, as the title of an article in the leading American magazine *World Tennis* claimed, 'Fifty Years to Honor a Winner'.<sup>13</sup>

When he died in 1995 Perry's place as a sporting legend was beyond dispute, but for much of his life after moving to America – this book shows – he remained curiously unheralded in the land of his birth. Although highly regarded among casual followers of the sport, the hurt caused in his amateur days was not easily forgotten, either by Perry himself or by his detractors among the movers and shakers of tennis officialdom.

In order to appreciate why he was for so long the nation's unsung grand slam and Davis Cup hero, and where responsibility for this lies, we must first examine Perry's family background and the social and political world into which he grew up during and after the First World War. As we shall see, it was Fred's humble origins, together with his no-nonsense personality, that provide the key to understanding why he made as many enemies as friends in the upper- and middle-class dominated world of British tennis; why he was, in the words expressed by the American John Tunis in 1934, 'not a popular champion at home'.

# Moving from north to south

**A**NY CHAMPION in sport needs good fortune. In tennis, a whole host of qualities mark out those who reach the upper echelons of the game: technical mastery of a range of shots, speed around the court, stamina, a calm temperament under pressure, immense determination – all have been characteristics of the world’s best players from the emergence of modern lawn tennis at the end of the 19th century through to the era of Federer, Nadal, Djokovic and Murray. But chance also plays a part.

Fred Perry believed that 15 to 20 per cent of any player’s destiny was guided by luck, and at the start of his autobiography (published in 1984 with the help of *Observer* journalist Ronald Atkin) he claimed a few

especially fortuitous moments helped him to build a successful career in tennis. These were his victory over the number four seed at Wimbledon in 1930, achieved in front of an LTA selection committee, which instantly awarded him a place on a British touring team overseas; reaching the final of the Davis Cup in 1931, which brought international recognition, despite Britain losing out to France; and finally winning the Davis Cup in 1933. That, he believed, was when his career ‘really took off’.<sup>1</sup>

While these occasions were clearly key landmarks in Perry’s rise to eminence, the second and third in particular owed more to his talent and determination (and that of his Davis Cup team-mates) than to pure chance. Aside from these incidents and random moments such as net cords that sometimes influence the outcome of individual matches, there were in Perry’s case arguably three other crucial moments or contextual factors where providence played a vital part in his development.

Two of these three – each of which has not hitherto been adequately highlighted in discussions of Perry’s career – will be discussed in later chapters. The first of them, however, came very early in his life, and was in some ways the most important, for seen in the light of his family background the prospect of Perry becoming the world’s best tennis player in the mid-1930s was remote in the extreme.

Perry was a product of the industrial north of England. His father, Samuel Perry, was born in the 1870s

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into a working-class household in Stockport, south-east of Manchester. Today Stockport combines residential and commercial development and honours one of its most famous sons with the 'Fred Perry Way,' a 14-mile walking route around the locality, opened in 2002.

The town first expanded in the 19th century in the wake of the industrial revolution, mainly through cotton and allied industries. In the 1840s a huge viaduct was built over the River Mersey at the western edge of the town to improve railway links north and south, though some visitors were not impressed by the sight that greeted them as they arrived by train. In his famous 1840s book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels wrote that Stockport was renowned as one of the 'duskiest, smokiest holes' in the region, and had an appearance from the viaduct that was 'excessively repellent'.<sup>2</sup>

Fred's grandfather, also called Samuel Perry, scraped a living by working like many of his contemporaries in the local cotton mills. Sam Perry junior was a bright child, and although opportunities for educational advancement were severely restricted for those from poor backgrounds, he won a scholarship to attend the prestigious Stockport Grammar School. His prospects were blighted when his father contracted an illness and died at an early age in the late 1880s. Instead of going to the local grammar, Sam Perry at the age of ten followed in his father's footsteps by working at the cotton factory.

Forced by his circumstances to grow up quickly, Sam began to develop an interest in trade unionism, which was well entrenched in the cotton industry. Even as a teenager, he displayed qualities that marked him out as a potential future leader within labour circles. He showed proficiency in machine drawing and construction, maths and applied mechanics, and his day-to-day work gave him a close understanding of the complex pay structures in the Lancashire cotton trade.

At the time of his 21st birthday – by which age his own son was to have played at Wimbledon – Sam was established as a pillar of the late-Victorian ‘respectable’ working classes. His commitment to trade unionism was reflected in his election as president of the Stockport Cotton Spinners’ Association, and he devoted time away from work and study to preaching from Methodist pulpits and becoming prominent in the Manchester temperance movement.<sup>3</sup>

The real heart of Sam’s life as a political activist was the Co-operative movement. From humble beginnings in Rochdale in the 1840s, the Co-op, with its ethos of supporting lower income families through worker ownership of industries and profit sharing, grew to become an established feature of many working-class communities. By the beginning of the 20th century, the movement had some two million members and through its various outlets had built up trade worth about £50m – nearly £4bn at today’s prices. Anxious to promote Co-

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operative ideals, Sam was appointed as president of the Stockport Co-operative Society in 1908 and later of the Birkenhead society, two of the largest in the country.<sup>4</sup> By this time he also had a family to support. In 1901 he married a local girl, Hannah Birch (a fellow worker at the local cotton mill), and the couple lived in a small house at Carrington Road, Stockport.

It was in Carrington Road that two children were born, Edith in 1903 and Frederick John on 18 May 1909 (with another daughter to follow later). Just a matter of weeks after Fred's birth, the men's singles at Wimbledon, already established as the most prestigious tennis event in the world, was won for the third time by Arthur Gore, whose victory at the age of 41 made him (as he remains) the tournament's oldest singles champion. It was also to be the last time the title was captured by an Englishman for 25 years.

Edith and Fred grew up accustomed to the long absences of their father, absorbed as he was either in his work or his many improving causes. The children also found themselves frequently on the move – a recurrent theme in Fred's life – in the interest of supporting their father's burgeoning career. Fred was still very young when the family moved briefly to Bolton and then on again to Wallasey, a convenient location for Sam when he spent time during the First World War working for the Co-op in Liverpool. Fred recalled how on one occasion air raid warnings sounded suddenly at school, with the result that

the children were sent into a nearby field to lie beside a large Red Cross flag in case 'the Hun' arrived imminently.<sup>5</sup>

As the carnage of the Great War came to a close, the Perry family found themselves on the move again. For many years Sam was a vocal advocate of direct electoral engagement to advance the Co-operative cause; this at a time when many in the movement clung to a stance of maintaining political neutrality. In 1918 agreement was finally reached to launch a fully-fledged Co-operative party, though it met with little initial success: only one of ten candidates was elected when a general election took place at the end of the year. Sam's credentials made him the natural choice to become the first secretary of the new party. This was a post he was to hold for a quarter of a century, and one that required the biggest adjustment yet for his wife and children – a move to London.

The family settled soon after the war into a solid three-bedroom house in Brentham, a new 'garden suburb' in Ealing, west London. For Sam, living at Pitshanger Lane in Ealing offered many advantages. For one thing Brentham, which became an architectural model for the likes of Hampstead garden suburb, was an example of Co-operative housing policy in practice. His end-of-terrace property was built in 1906 by Ealing Tenants Limited, which specialised in offering subsidised rents to workers who owned shares in the company.

The Brentham estate also provided the Perry family with a ready-made sense of community, notably through

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a well-supported local club that provided a range of social and sporting facilities. Perhaps most important, the location suited Sam's political ambitions. He was not too far from the Co-operative party's headquarters near Charing Cross station, and he was also within striking distance of the House of Commons at Westminster.

Increasingly, as he settled into London life, Sam hoped to become a Member of Parliament, making his first foray into electoral politics by standing at the Stockport by-election of 1920. He was a strong believer in close ties between the Co-op and the Labour party – 'we come of common stock; we are working for the common end', he claimed – but this strategy was not universally accepted.

The local Labour group in Stockport preferred to adopt its own candidate rather than give the Co-operative party a free run, and with left-wing votes split Perry failed to secure election both at the by-election and again when he stood for Stockport at the general election in 1922. He did though succeed in becoming MP in 1923 for Kettering, a Northants constituency with a tradition of co-operation based around the local boot and shoe industry. Unlike in Stockport, socialists and co-operators worked in harmony, and standing on a Labour-Co-operative ticket Perry won with a 2,500 majority over the Conservatives. When Labour formed its first, short-lived, government in 1924, Perry was to the fore in assisting with legislation that was close to his

heart: an Act providing improved housing for the poorest sections of society.

Although it could not be known at the time, the move to London in 1919 was to be of huge significance for Fred, as well as for his father. Sam's life had been greatly influenced by a tragic event (the early death of a parent) when he was just ten years old, and Fred's future was also shaped by a major change of circumstances at the same tender age. With hindsight, it was one of the three significant pieces of good fortune, over and above those he identified in his memoirs, without which he was unlikely to have become a world-renowned star.

Tennis before the First World War was largely confined to the most affluent sections of British society, and someone like Perry, coming from humble origins in Stockport, was unlikely to have picked up a racket – still less to have competed in key tournaments and sought to build a high-profile career in the sport – if his family had not moved away from its northern working-class roots.

While the number of tennis clubs across the country was growing steadily in the early decades of the 20th century, the opportunities in the north of England were more restricted than in the London area. In the early 1920s the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire combined, covering huge tracts of land in the north-west, had fewer clubs in total than were found in Middlesex – the county Perry in due course took pride in representing.<sup>6</sup> In the long term, it was crucial to Fred's development that he

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lived not simply in the southern English heartland of lawn tennis, but in close proximity to the twin power centres of the game: the LTA, based at central London, and the All England Club at Wimbledon.

While his relationship with these bodies was to be fraught, his Ealing base provided him with openings unavailable in many other parts of the country, enabling him to come to the attention of prominent figures in the game at a relatively young age. More immediately, what the move south did was to stimulate young Fred's interest in sport. When he had time for recreation, Sam enjoyed running, bowls and in particular golf, and his liking of sport was to be taken up in full measure by his son.

Sam hoped his children would find better prospects in London than he had at a young age, and for Fred he envisaged a career in commerce or business; something which required staying on at school beyond the usual leaving age of 14. For a year or so Fred went to a local elementary school, Drayton Green, and then progressed to Ealing county school. But his heart was never in academic learning. 'I hated homework,' he later conceded. Instead he channelled his energies into a whole variety of both team and individual sports. He played for the school football and cricket teams, though he admitted to being a poor wicketkeeper. His sporting heroes were jockeys and racing-car drivers, and like so many teenage boys he dreamt of playing for one of the top soccer teams of the day such as Aston Villa.

Fred's passion for bats and balls was fuelled by the ready accessibility of excellent facilities on his doorstep. His first love was table tennis, a game he rapidly improved at by joining the local YMCA, as well as by pushing a table up against the kitchen wall in the evenings; much to the annoyance of his parents, who felt he should be doing homework. As a self-taught player, Fred held the bat with a hatchet grip rather than the conventional penholder style; in due course he transferred this grip to a tennis racket and never changed it.

Above all it was the Brentham Institute, an essential component of the garden suburb concept, which provided Perry with ample opportunities to indulge his love of games. As well as providing a venue for community meetings and dances, the club was endowed with football pitches, a cricket field, bowling greens, tennis courts and table tennis tables. This was 'paradise' after the 'bleak streets' of his early years, he claimed; for a youngster arriving from the north 'it was marvellous'.<sup>7</sup>

With so much on offer, Fred never really sampled tennis until he was a teenager. Many tennis clubs were restricted to adults only, and among youngsters the game was mostly confined to small numbers of private schools. It did not feature on the curriculum of Ealing school and Perry first dabbled, but no more, when he was 14. Only in the following summer, as a 15-year-old, did he start to play with any intent, a remarkably late age by modern-day standards. On a family holiday to

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Eastbourne he was favourably impressed watching tennis being played at Devonshire Park, and he also made his first trip as a paying customer to see 'the Championships' at Wimbledon. Sam Perry agreed to buy his son an old racket for five shillings, and with his natural aptitude for ball games Fred was soon showing promise on court.

The teenage Perry tested himself in serious competition for the first time in 1927. Despite arriving with a tatty old racket and playing with his curious hatchet grip, he caused a stir at the Middlesex Junior Championships by reaching the singles final and winning the doubles. Any thoughts that sweeping to the top in tennis would be easy were dispelled when he used his success in the county championships to enter the British junior championships, hosted annually on hard courts at Wimbledon. He was brushed aside early on in the tournament and, worse still, his only racket broke, leaving him upset and embarrassed.

He described himself as a 'competent quarter-finalist' at most junior tournaments; he never became the junior champion of Middlesex, let alone of England. As his father recognised, he had much catching up to do, having come to the game late, and he was also handicapped by his size. He was about five and a half feet in height (with a growth spurt still to come), and he lacked the power of more physically developed, hard-hitting opponents.<sup>8</sup>

Fred's height was less of a problem in table tennis, the sport at which he really excelled as a youngster. His

decision to apply for membership of the Herga club in Harrow was influenced by its provision of table tennis facilities as well as tennis courts, and Fred's progress was so rapid that he was soon chosen to represent England against the other home nations. Table tennis as an international sport was still in its infancy in the 1920s – dominated by the likes of Hungary and Sweden – and with relatively few serious participants Perry was soon making inroads at the highest levels of the game.

He found favour with the British aristocrat Ivor Montagu, a prominent player and administrator, and made his first trip abroad with the England team to compete at the world championships in Sweden in 1928. The following year Fred startled observers by defeating the local favourite to take the world title in Budapest, prompting Montagu to reflect on qualities that were to be prominent characteristics of Perry's tennis: speed of thought and action, willingness to adapt and change tactics when necessary, plus boundless determination and self-confidence. Although barely reported upon in Britain, where table tennis had a limited following, Perry had secured a stunning success: at the age of just 19, he was a world champion.<sup>9</sup>

As Fred's passion for sport grew, so too did his reservations about the world in which his father operated. In May 1929, although not yet old enough to vote, he dutifully assisted Sam on the campaign trail in Kettering. Sam had lost the seat in 1924 and was

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determined to regain it. In the end the hard work paid off and he managed to defeat his Tory opponent, though his return to the House of Commons was overshadowed by a gathering economic crisis that eventually proved too much for Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government. Sam refused to join MacDonald's call for a cross-party National administration to face the crisis, saying if he did so he would find his portrait hanging in the Conservative Club in Kettering.

Like many Labour loyalists he was swept aside when the National government won a huge majority in 1931, losing his Kettering seat by nearly 9,000 votes. Although Fred was given the task of going round the local factories kissing all the girls – 'not a bad assignment' – he had never warmed to party politics. His experiences of electoral campaigning ultimately left him determined thereafter to 'steer clear of anything remotely political', he wrote in his memoirs. 'And I have never voted since.'<sup>10</sup>

While he never carried forward his father's interest in politics or religion, Fred's family background and upbringing nevertheless had a lasting impact as he matured into adulthood. Throughout his life, Fred was to be characterised, in addition to a love of sport, by numerous traits and attitudes associated with Sam: a strong work ethic; a tremendous desire to succeed; enormous self-belief; and a clear sense of regional and class identity. Fred had lived long enough in Stockport and Wallasey to always refer to himself in later years as

being 'north country', part of the explanation he felt for his reputation for plain speaking. He came from a part of the world, he said, 'where we don't call a spade a spade, we call it a bloody shovel!'<sup>11</sup>

He may have had little time for party politics, but Fred also shared his father's instinctive sympathy for the underdog. He disliked elitism and hated anything that smacked of being put upon by those who regarded themselves as his social superiors. He made up his mind early in life that he wasn't going to 'let people tell me what to do'.

His feisty, outspoken personality was to be much to the fore after he took a major decision in 1929. Although he continued to take part in county and national championships for a few more years, table tennis diminished in appeal for Fred once he had conquered the heights of the game. His father echoed this view, and weighed in with a decisive intervention, telling his son of his concern about the amount of time Fred spent in the smoke-filled rooms that often hosted table tennis events. You look, he said, 'like death warmed up.... Why not concentrate on tennis?'<sup>12</sup>

From the summer of 1929 onwards Fred accepted that the time had come to give his full attention to a single sport rather than attempting to combine his twin passions. One thing was certain: his background, ambition and persona meant he would soon be ruffling feathers in the genteel world of British tennis.