

Lost era when courts arrived on back of lorry

Stuart Fraser

Tennis Correspondent



In the absence of any live and competitively meaningful tennis, a browse through YouTube for some classic matches could have you come across some fantastically colourful courts. There is the garish green used at the old Brighton International in the 1990s, or the psychedelic mix of red, blue and orange at the Women's Indoors in Tokyo in the late 1970s.

These were very different times in the sport, when it was played at lightning speed on the now-lost surface of carpet. Vacuum cleaners were used in between matches to ensure the conditions were suitable, while the court itself was rolled up at the end of the week and immediately transported to the next stop on the tour.

"They had a lorry that drove from tournament to tournament with the court in the back," Jo Durie, the former British No.1, recalls. "You would arrive at the next venue and they would still be trying to quickly put it down."

With carpet now close to extinction in professional tennis, it is easy to forget that Roger Federer, Serena Williams and Andy Murray — all still active to this day — have won tournaments on it. Last used on the ATP tour in 2008 and the WTA tour in 2018, the surface has since been cast into the wilderness in favour of the trusted trio of hard, clay and grass.

The decision was part of the homogenisation of court speeds in the 2000s. Low-bouncing carpet, a textile surface of nylon or rubber matting laid out on a

concrete or wooden base, was popular at a time when serve-and-volley was more common. But since the turn of the century, tournament directors around the world have favoured a slower pace of play, with longer rallies perceived to provide better entertainment.

There were also concerns about the physical impact on players. The rigid surface was notorious for causing injuries, whether it be rolled ankles, knee pain or nasty burns on the arms and legs.

"I actually turned my ankle on it in Brighton in 1992 in the very first point against Mary Joe Fernandez [the former world No.4 from the United States]," Durie says. "I couldn't believe it. I got the physio on, who taped it, and we only played another few games before I retired at 2-3. It was horrendous. If you didn't lift your foot when moving, the surface would just grab it."

The only sightings of carpet now at professional level are at less than a handful of second-tier tournaments, including the Eckental Challenger in Germany. "It is still one of the fastest tournaments I play all season," Ken Skupski, the former British Davis Cup player who won the doubles in Eckental last November, says. "It changes your movement patterns. You are more protective of your ankles."

"I am older [37 years old] and I am generally running forward and backwards. But if you watch the singles guys play, they really struggle to get used to the idea of moving on carpet because there are a lot more smaller steps required."

The phasing out of carpet has undoubtedly benefited someone like Rafael Nadal, who avoided it as much as he could in the early days of his career. The success of Tim Henman at the 2003 Paris Masters shows the type of player suited to carpet. The former Brit-

Murray enjoyed success playing on carpet early in his career



ish No.1 attacked his way to the biggest title of his career, defeating Federer and Roddick along the way.

"If you said there were going to be more ATP events on carpet now, there would be a lot of guys licking their lips," Skupski insists. "Players who probably think they never have a chance of winning an ATP title would play at a higher level because their game style is more suited to coming forward."

Some players in the game, including Federer, have called for a return to the days in which there was more variation

in the style of play. Durie agrees. "I would like to see a little more variety and pace on the tour," she says. "We have got medium and slow pace most of the time. I think there is a place for courts that are a little bit faster to suit all players on the tour."

"Tennis is a sport of all surfaces, all-weather, indoors and outdoors and I think players have to adapt. That is a great nuance of the game."

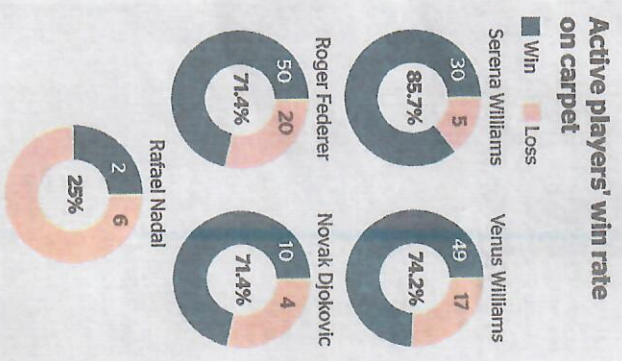
Skupski is looking forward to a future return trip to Eckental, where the style of tennis is like no other.

ATP Carpet singles titles

Jimmy Connors	45
John McEnroe	43
Ivan Lendl	32
Boris Becker	26
Bjorn Borg	23

WTA carpet singles titles

Martina Navratilova	88
Billie Jean King	36
Chris Evert	35
Steffi Graf	31
Virginia Wade	26



"For me, it's fun to watch," Skupski says. "I've been around the tour for quite a long time and I almost get a little bit bored in the sense that you watch two guys who are very fit and can play rallies of 30 to 40 shots. There are only so many times you can watch a match like that over the course of the week."

"It is nice to go to a tournament and see how players like that adapt their game outside their comfort zone. I wish there were more carpet events. And it keeps me young as well, because I don't have to run as fast."