

Mr. Old School

Spurning a professional career, JPR Williams found peace and pleasure as an amateur

This month it has been 40 years since the U.S. National Tennis Championships became the U.S. Open. As was noted in the April issue of this magazine, tennis had been ruled by an amateur code, and indeed the four major tournaments were amateur affairs. That all changed in 1968, and the first professional tournament to be held in the new "open" era of tennis was the British Hard Court Championship in Bournemouth, England.

One of the participants in that first professional tournament is not as well known in tennis circles as he became known in another sport. He is John Peter Rhys Williams of Wales, known to the rugby world simply as JPR.

JPR Williams had won the Britain Junior Tennis Championship in 1966, becoming Britain's most promising young tennis player in addition to one of the most promising young rugby players. He would later beat future top tennis players such as Dick Stockton and Sandy Mayer. But in April 1968, he found himself in the 32-man draw of that first professional tennis tournament with Rod Laver, Ken Rosewall and Pancho Gonzalez. He lost, however, in the first round to Bob Howe, an Australian who himself had won several Grand Slam doubles titles.

It was just as well. After losing to Howe, JPR drove 130 miles to Bridgend, Wales, to play in a rugby match—with the selectors for the Welsh National Team in attendance (having no idea that the kid with No. 15 on his back had played in the first professional tennis tournament earlier in the day).

He distinguished himself in that rugby match at age 19 and was selected to play for the Welsh national team. He would maintain his position at fullback for Wales for the next 12 years. When he left international rugby in 1981, he had become one of the all-time greats.

Oddly enough, it was tennis' move toward professionalism that drove JPR

by Bob Latham

to rugby in the first place. His father was a doctor who believed that sports should be strictly amateur, and in 1968, rugby existed under a strict amateur code—a code that would not change until 1995. While JPR was deciding whether to pursue tennis or rugby, he embarked on his own medical career. Ultimately, rugby's contin-

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uing amateur code, which allowed JPR more latitude in studying medicine, is what steered him away from tennis.

His multidimensional capacity came in handy on the rugby pitch on several occasions. In New Zealand, while he was playing for the British Lions (made up of the best players from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales), a player on the New Zealand national team was hit and fell to the ground unconscious. As he was turning blue, it was JPR—playing for the opposing team in a rugby international!—who turned him on his side and cleared his airway so that he could breathe until help could arrive. Even more extraordinary was the time JPR split his head open in a match, went to the sideline, stitched it up himself, and returned to the field of play. Can your modern-day sports hero do that?

I had a chance to catch up with JPR, now 59, at the most recent World Rugby Awards banquet. Interestingly, he feels that if rugby had been professional in 1968, as it is now, he would have stuck with tennis.

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His sports romanticism surfaces when he speaks about things that were lost when sports became professional, which, as he noted, caused the focus to shift unduly to money. For example, the devaluation of the Davis Cup competition is especially disappointing to a man who represented his country on the rugby pitch for 13 years. "It used to be a fantastic event, but the players don't get paid enough to play in it to do so regularly."

He has a mixed reaction to the emphasis on power in the modern tennis game, which is somewhat incongruous to hear from a guy who enjoyed physical collisions. "TV doesn't show how hard they are hitting the ball," said JPR. "The rallies are phenomenal. But I don't think there is as much artistry as their used to be."

Does JPR regret not playing in an era when he could be remunerated for his athletic accomplishments at the level of today's athletes? The answer, for a sports romantic, is of course "no." "I was lucky to play when I did," he says. And he speaks with pride about his Welsh teammates. "We have all done well in our lives. And we stay in touch." And indeed, the camaraderie he shares with his teammates provides further explanation for his decision in 1968 to gravitate away from a professional individual sport to an amateur team sport.

So while a number of the 32 men in that first professional tennis tournament 40 years ago went on to fame and fortune in the world of tennis, there was one man in that draw who is comfortable in his role as doctor, teammate, rugby legend, and one of the last of the sports romantics. ■

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