

Strawberries ... and Heat

Protocol at Wimbledon sometimes can seem daunting, but this year, with hot temperatures, even royalty had to sweat a little



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Wimbledon. The word conjures up multiple images: tradition, grass, the royal box, protocol, players in white, prestige, strawberries and cream. The image that does not come to mind is “heat.” During my time at Wimbledon this year, all of the above were on display.

The first thing you notice upon approaching Wimbledon is how close you can get to it without realizing that you are near a world-class sporting event. There are no street hawkers, no pub crawlers, no giant stands or stadiums visible on approach. It retains its feel as a neighborhood club—albeit one with a new retractable roof over its main court that cost more than \$100 million. I suppose the fact that Centre Court’s name is known the world round may also be a distinguishing feature.

But the grounds are not extensive. Even Henman Hill, which TV coverage is fond of showing as general admission patrons watch the matches on a big screen, is not exactly Woodstock. It’s a fairly isolated patch of grass. And on this day, with temperatures well into the 80s, those patrons had an unfamiliar introduction to sweat.

Given the surprising weather conditions, the proletariat are allowed to overheat. Royals, apparently, are not. After Serena Williams made quick work of Vera Zvonareva in the women’s final, the men’s doubles final ensued. Shortly into the match, the roof was closed about one-sixth of the way. Why on earth would they do that, I wondered. I looked at the shadows on the court. It had no effect on the players’ ability to see. There was also not a chance that it would rain—rare words to associate with Wimbledon, which installed the new roof in part to address the issue. Finally, my curiosity got the best of me and I asked a nearby usher why the roof had been partially closed. “The sun was hitting the royal box,” came the reply. Well, there you go. Somewhere, Donald Trump is plotting his U.S. Open strategy and thinking, “You can do that?”

Centre Court itself is not comparable to any venue in the U.S. or perhaps anywhere else. First of all, there is the size of it. It is the smallest of tennis’ Grand Slam championship courts — seating is only 15,000 — and because of its configuration, it is remarkably intimate. The makeup of the spec-

tators is not the usual American sports crowd—there are very few children, and the adults who are there are dressed for church, even on sun-baked days.

Then, of course, there is the demeanor of the crowd. No outbursts—only polite applause breaks the regal feel of the place. And no one does anything to rile the sensibilities of the proprietors—perhaps obeying the signs found throughout the bowels of Centre Court. In fact, so much protocol can be daunting. At one point, I was headed back to my Centre Court seat—third in from the aisle. The aisle seat on my row was occupied by a disabled man, while the second seat in on the row in front of me was temporarily unoccupied. So, I thought I would do the considerate

WIMBLEDON RETAINS THE FEEL OF A PRIVATE CLUB—NO STREET HAWKERS, PUB CRAWLERS OR GIANT STANDS IN SIGHT.

thing—I stepped across the person on the aisle in the row in front of me, onto the unoccupied seat, and bounded into my own seat. No harm, no foul, I thought. I was wrong. Handkerchiefs, scarves, and any other manner of wiping cloth were pulled from pockets to dust off any speck of Wimbledon’s

hallowed turf that I may have deposited on the chair. Looks were directed at me as if I’d just stolen the crown jewels. Or as if I were John McEnroe—a man who had, shall we say, an uneasy relationship with Wimbledon.

While Centre Court is the main attraction, many tennis fans became familiar with Court 18 this year as the site of the longest tennis match in history—the epic Isner–Mahut first-round match that prematurely changed the green grass to a well-worn brown. It is a tiny stage for such a compelling show, similar perhaps to an American college tennis showcase court. How the Wimbledon stewards dealt with crowd control on that court during the three days of the match is not easy to fathom.

And the strawberries and cream? Well, they have actually improved over the years—not necessarily the ideal cuisine to beat the heat, but a staple of Wimbledon to which succumbing seems inevitable. ■

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