

# Lost Courts of America:

## Racquet Club of Chicago Back from the Grave

BY JAMES ZUG

IN JANUARY 2001 JAMES ZUG BEGAN A SERIES OF ARTICLES IN *THE DEDANS* ABOUT U.S. COURT TENNIS FACILITIES NO LONGER IN USE OR EXISTENCE WITH A LOOK AT THE BUCKINGHAM STREET COURT. SINCE THEN, HE HAS WRITTEN ON THE BOSTON ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION IN MAY 2001, MYOPIA IN AUGUST 2001, THE 1656 COURT IN NEW YORK IN APRIL 2002, HARVARD IN AUGUST 2002, AND THE CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION IN DECEMBER 2004.

Until Prince's Court opened at the International Tennis Club in Washington, D.C. in 1997, the most recent brand-spanking-new, built-from-scratch tennis court in the United States was at Racquet Club of Chicago (RCOC). The club was incorporated in November 1922 and on October 1, 1924 it opened its clubhouse on Schiller and North Dearborn Streets. Aside from its two racquets courts and five squash singles courts (and later two squash doubles courts), the Racquet Club had a court tennis court.

One of the giants of winter racquet sports, Charles Eugene Williams became the RCOC's first tennis and racquets professional. An Englishman, Charley Williams had apprenticed at Prince's, the famous 19th century home of racquets in London. One of his fellow apprentices was a short Scot named Jock Soutar. Williams then moved on to Harrow, before ending up at Queen's. Thus, in a spate of a few years, he had worked at Britain's three classic professional grooming grounds.

Racquets was his best game. In 1909 at the age of 21, he won the English pro racquets title by defeated Walter Hawes of Wellington College. Two years later he became world champion in racquets when he beat Jamsetji of Bombay (the first and only non-Westerner to hold the title) 5-1 at Queen's and Prince's. Just after winning the title, he came to the U.S. on a racquets tour. In Philadelphia he played against his old stablemate, Jock Soutar, who had come to Philadelphia in 1907 to

work under Fred Tompkins at the new Racquet Club. Williams, suffering from a heavy cold, gave Soutar three aces and got crushed 15-6 15-6 15-7.

Cruel coincidence almost ended his career and his life. In April 1912 he sailed to New York to face George Standing, the first great American-based racquets pro, in his first defense of his world title. However, he sailed on the *Titanic*. As Allison Danzig memorably described it, Williams "was rescued only after he had spent nine hours in a small boat in the ice lanes of the North Atlantic." The world championship was called off and Williams returned to London that summer, where "he was received like a man who had come back from the grave."

In 1913 Standing stood down and Soutar challenged Williams. The first leg was at Queen's, where Williams won 4-2. The second leg, in Philadelphia, however, proved to be one-sided. Perhaps Williams was

flooded with relief at reaching American shores. Soutar won all four games easily to take the title 6-4. In 1922 they faced each other again for the title. Again, Williams won the first leg, in Philadelphia, 4-3, only to lose four straight games in the second, in New York, to go down 7-4.

In 1924 Williams left Queen's and moved to Chicago. He arrived in time to participate in the official opening of the racquets courts, with a match between himself & Harry Boakes and Jock Soutar & Eddie Rodgers, a Canadian-born protégé of Boakes' who worked at the Racquet & Tennis Club from 1898 into the 1930s.

Chicago proved to be a boon for his racquets career.

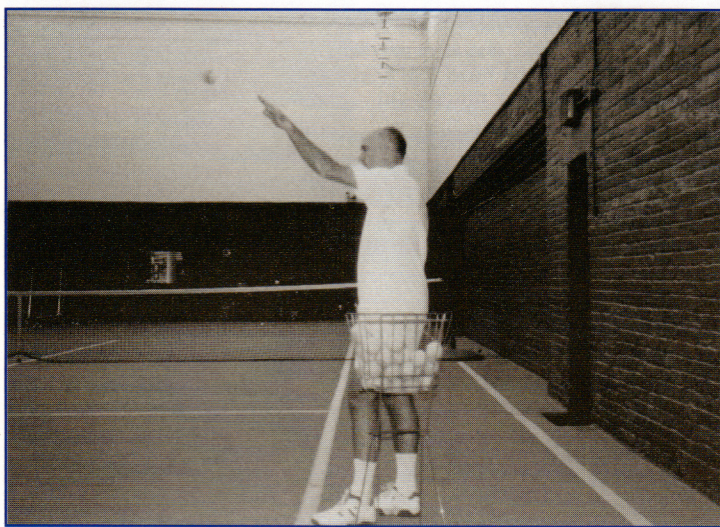
In 1929 Williams met Soutar again for the world racquets championship. The first leg was held in Philadelphia. Williams was so vigorously pumped up that he broke six racquets in the first game alone; by the end of the match both men had broken two dozen racquets "some of them reduced to kindling," remembered Allison Danzig. Like his previous two championship matches, Williams won the first leg, 4-2. But now, for the first time, he played the second leg on a familiar court, in Chicago. With Jay Gould



The spectacular ceiling of the old court tennis court in Chicago.. photo by James Zug

in the gallery, Williams won three of the first four games to clinch it. One of the most spectacular comebacks in winter racquet sports history, Williams reclaimed his world title 16 years after losing it.

Tennis was not Williams' forte, although he was a very good player. In April 1934 he played in the first U.S. Open at the Racquet & Tennis Club and reached the semifinals before losing 6-1 3-6 6-1 6-0 to eventual champion Walter Kinsella. The game was never particularly popular in Chicago. The Chicago Athletic Association's court had disappeared after just eight years, and the Racquet Club's never took hold either. Perhaps the distance from other courts stymied any growth. Williams had an energetic supporting staff. Joe Burnett, a Queen's pro, joined Williams in 1924 and stayed until he moved on to the University Club of Chicago in 1933 (he remained there for the next 36 years). In 1926 Michael Petrosky came to Chicago from Tuxedo. Williams tried to jazz up the court with exhibitions. The most notable was played in 1931 when Pierre Etchebaster, the reigning world champion,



A professional tosses out balls on a former court tennis court now used exclusively for lawn tennis at the Racquet Club of Chicago. photo by James Zug

played against Williams.

The club champions were Barrett Wendell in 1924 and 1925; Charles Pike, an old racquets player, in 1926; Leander McCormick, a top Chicago squash player, in 1927; Wolcott Blair in 1928; Edwin Stanley in 1929; and Lucian Williams, who was a former intercollegiate lawn tennis champion, in 1930. Probably the apogee of tennis in Chicago, beside the Etchebaster visit, came in 1927 when George D. Hubbard, an Englishman living in Chicago, won the U.S. national amateur title, beating George Wightman in the final.

In October 1935 Charley Williams retired. Ten days later he died in a Chicago hospital at the age of 47.

The next year the Racquet Club decided to transform the court into a lawn tennis court. The reasons, as laid out by Danzig, were simple: "The country was still in a severe depression; there was not much activity at the club, and few members were using the court." With the change to lawners, women began to play and soon the court, despite the fact that walls encroached to the endlines, was booked until 10 in the evening.

The supreme irony of the conversion of the court was felt in 1960

when Jack Johnson became the head pro. Johnson had been world champion in tennis from 1957 to 1959. (Another member of the club included William J.C. Surtees, the world racquets champion who won the U.S. national amateur tennis doubles in 1978 with Ralph Howe.) How the game would have thrived under Johnson is not clear, but it was probably a great loss. Johnson, who was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, retired in 1988 and died in March 1996 at age 81.

Among all former U.S. court tennis courts, Chicago's would seem to be the most playable as every day there you can hear the ping of a racquet striking a tennis ball. But the club installed a polyurethane floor below the carpeting and the price-tag to convert it back to court tennis would be close to half a million dollars. A few years ago the club bought an apartment building across the street, but zoning issues have prevented it from relocating the lawn tennis there and returning the court to its original state.

"There is always talk about converting the court back," says Racquet Club pro John Cashman, noting the high number of racquets players in the club who are familiar with court tennis. "The shell is there and all you would need to do is add a tambour, dedan, grille, penthouse, and galleries. We've already got a royal dedan stuffed with court tennis memorabilia, so we are ready to go."

If the court was revived, it would be a journey worthy of its pro who more than once came back from the grave.

*James Zug, the former editor of The Dedans, is the author of American Traveler: The Life and Adventures of John Ledyard, the Man who Dreamed of Walking the World, published by Basic Books in New York earlier this year.*

## The Georgian Court



The USCTA Board of Governors spent a day at the Georgian Court in Lakewood, New Jersey, on September 11, 2005 to check on progress of the restoration of the famed Jay Gould court. Some of the Governors had a chance to play on the court, which has been retrieved from the world of "lost courts" through the energetic and active presence of the USCTA and the Preservation Foundation. photo by Brian Owens