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The Quest for the \$100,000 Plum

1945-1947

Amid the rubble and devastation of World War II, history was left to ponder what might have been. Had there been no war, would Thomas Dewey have become president? Would baseball's Bob Feller have pitched 30 wins in a single season? Would Bobby Riggs have won back-to-back Wimbledons? It was only natural to speculate.

In the United States, tennis limped along from 1942 to 1946, encouraged by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as a morale booster for the home front and the troops overseas. Still, some tournaments were cancelled for the duration; others played with reduced draws and shortened schedules, or were limited to women. Newport, the nation's oldest tournament, was suspended until war's end. At Forest Hills, the men's matches were cut from best-of-five sets to best-of-three until the semifinals. At Seabright in 1945, the tournament was held with a field of just eight men and four women.

The end of hostilities left the rest of the tennis world to pick up the pieces. Only after some debate did the All England Club decide to stage Wimbledon in 1946, despite a shortage of racquets, balls, and court equipment, and with a large section of the still-damaged Centre Court cordoned off. Wartime passions led the International Tennis Federation, the organization that oversaw Davis Cup competition, to temporarily expel nine countries from the

organization, including Germany, Italy, and Japan. The Cup itself remained locked in a bank vault in Australia.

Of course, none of this mattered to Bobby. In September 1945, home on a 30-day leave, he arrived at the Alameda Naval Station in Oakland, where he was greeted by Kay, Bobby Jr., and the newest Riggs, Larry, born June 14, 1944, while Bobby was in the Pacific. After a year and a half apart, Bobby was nervous about the effect of such a long separation. Kay quickly reassured him. “Where’ve you been, Riggs? Your hair looks awful.”

Naturally, his first order of business was to make up for lost time. Moving to Los Angeles, Bobby returned to the Los Angeles Tennis Club, which had changed little since he was last there. Joining him was a familiar crowd: Bill Tilden, Don Budge, Gene Mako, Frank Parker, Frank Shields, and Fred Perry. While awaiting his discharge, Bobby was able to work on his game, rustle up money matches, and mingle with the Hollywood set—Errol Flynn, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Humphrey Bogart, Claudette Colbert, Gary Cooper, Charlie Chaplin. He might find himself thrown in a match with some of the up-and-coming juniors at the club, which then included a temperamental kid from East L.A. named Pancho Gonzalez.

Without a professional tour, Bobby, Budge, Perry, and the other players cast about for something to do. Tilden suggested staging a big professional tournament in Los Angeles. Why, he said, they could even play it at the L.A. Tennis Club. Always one to prefer the grand gesture over practical or personal necessity, Tilden then proposed, “Maybe we could play it for some charity.”

Terrific idea, they agreed, but forget the charity. They had been away for a long time and needed to resume earning money.

Billed the World Hard Court Professional Championships, the event was held at the L.A. Tennis Club the first week of December, four weeks after Bobby’s official discharge from the Navy on November 3, 1945. Tilden acted as tournament director, promoter, and participant. Though 52 years old and way past his glory years, Tilden was still a monumental figure in the game, admired by players and beloved by fans. Not only that, but his 52-year-old game was nothing to sniff at.

Before enthusiastic crowds, Tilden amazed everybody by reaching the semifinals, dispatching big-hitting Lester Stoefer 7-5, 6-0 in the quarterfinals, a feat made more remarkable by the fact that the old man had been down 5-2 in the first set. The next day, Tilden returned to earth, getting trounced by Budge, but in a third-place playoff, he again surprised the gallery by defeating Perry in a tough three-set match. Like the Tilden of old, he hit aces all over the court, and seized every opportunity to send his forehand drives deep into the corners for winners.

The final pitted Budge against Bobby, the two players most fans expected to slug it out for the title of world's professional champion. With the public largely ignorant of Bobby's victories over Budge in their Army-Navy series, Budge remained the overwhelming favorite. Few knew that the Budge who walked out on the court that day was not the awe-inspiring Budge who had dominated Bobby in both the amateur and professional ranks.

Up a set and 3-1 in the second set of the best-of-five-set encounter, Budge looked like he would maintain his dominance, but then Bobby roared back. He kept the ball away from Budge's backhand, attacked Budge's second serve, and lobbed at every opportunity to take advantage of Budge's lingering shoulder injury. Bobby took five straight games to win the second set and then went up 5-2 in the third set. Budge started grasping his right arm. He called time and had a doctor summoned to the court. Budge complained of cramping in his arm, and the doctor gave him a quick rubdown before letting him continue. After Bobby served out the third set, 6-2, the players were given an intermission, during which Budge retired to the locker room, where he received a complete rubdown, took a shower, and changed his clothes. It was of no use. Bobby ran through the fourth set, 6-0, to win the match.

Eventually, after collecting from the losing bettors in the crowd, a jubilant Bobby spoke to the press. "I'm sorry that it happened that way," he said, alluding to Budge's arm troubles, "but I'd have beaten him anyway. I'm champion today. I've always wanted to be the champ and I've worked and struggled all along towards that end. I caught up with Budge today. Shake hands with the new champion, boys."

But few were ready for a new champion to be crowned. Most fans refused to believe Bobby could defeat Budge on even terms. The newspapers speculated Budge's ailing arm was behind the defeat, and Budge himself suggested as much. To settle the issue, a rematch was scheduled for the next month, January 1946, at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles. Sixty-five hundred people packed into the hall, the biggest turnout yet to see a match on the West Coast. Thousands were turned away at the door.

"No one could believe that a little runt like me had a chance against the great Don Budge," Bobby said. "The time before had been a fluke, the master had been wounded and out of condition. There wasn't a tennis expert in the country who would make it even money. Which was fine with me, since I got terrific odds. That night in the dressing room before the match, Errol Flynn came in with some friends and they bet me twenty-five hundred dollars each at odds of two-to-one that I would lose. It was terrible. Even my supporters were worried. I got all the pre-game bets I could handle."

Inside the Pan-Pacific Auditorium a large clock hung from the ceiling some 35 feet above the center of the court. From the opening game, Bobby started lobbing. He figured that to get just the right depth, the ball had to be lofted about three inches beneath the bottom of the clock. Too low, and the ball would fall short, only to be put away by one of Budge's overhead smashes. Too high, and the ball would hit the clock, and Bobby would lose the point.

Budge played with the heaviest racquet in the game, 17½ ounces, a fact he was openly proud of and that only added to his reputation as a power hitter. "Budge was a straightaway smasher," Bobby said. "He killed the ball, never to the right or to the left, but directly down the middle. When he was fresh they were almost impossible to return. But how fresh will a man remain when he has to rely on his overhead for ninety percent of his game? Just about a set, I figured."

Budge played impressively that night. He took the first set, 6-4, and jumped to a 5-2 lead in the second set, winning with his big serve and attacking volley. His fans were screaming wildly and waving pennants in the air. While toweling off at a changeover,

Bobby looked up and saw Errol Flynn sitting in a sideline box a few feet away, smiling broadly and making dollar signs at him. The odds had skyrocketed by then, but Bobby continued to make bets using hand signals. Recalled one fan sitting behind Clark Gable and Groucho Marx: “Whenever Riggs changed sides in the match, he placed bets on himself by holding up fingers to the crowd. Gable held up one finger. Riggs shook his head and held up two fingers. Gable held up two fingers and nodded. That meant that Riggs bet Gable \$2,000 that he would win that set, even though he was behind, 5-2. He also placed bets with Groucho and others the same way.” On the other side of the court, his brother John Riggs was doing the same. Together, Bobby and John were able to get odds as high as 10-to-1 against Bobby’s winning. This, however, was no set-up. Cool and composed, Bobby stuck to his game plan. He started to throw up lobs.

“Every time I lobbed I could hear the crowd holding its breath to see where the ball would go,” Bobby said. “Most of them fell within six inches of the baseline. Only three of them actually hit the clock. I must have lobbed him about seventy times during that match.” In the second set, Bobby saved two set points, pulled even, and took the set, 9-7. “It was obvious to me,” Bobby said, “that Budge was getting tired. That racquet of his was beginning to feel as though it weighed twenty pounds. But I figured that much out before the match.”

“By the middle of the third set,” Bobby said, “Budge was getting sick of those lobs. He was deathly ill. At one point in the third game of that set I gave him seven straight lobs, all of which missed that clock by a hair. He smashed them all back, except the last one, and after that it was all downhill. I took the last two sets, 6-4, 8-6, and Budge retired to the dressing room with a steel elbow.”

In his own mind, Bobby felt vindicated. He had completed his mastery over Budge. Never again would he feel intimidated by the Great One. Others took notice, too. The great Tilden, who scoffed after Bobby’s victory at Wimbledon in 1939, wrote: “Once more Riggs proved himself the champion of the world. Once more Budge, greatly to my regret, showed he is no more the player he was... What has gone? I can only explain it by saying that Budge

now plays not to lose. He is no longer playing to win.” The supreme confidence that had served Budge so well had wilted. The Great One, who for so long seemed so far above everybody else, had returned to earth. Joining the company of mere mortals, he was now vulnerable.

Buoyed by the success of the World Hardcourt Professional Championships, Tilden was convinced there was a market for a series of professional tournaments. Enlisting players such as Bobby, Don Budge, Fred Perry, and others, he formed a new organization, the Professional Players Association. Tilden, a veteran of early professional tours, understood that the head-to-head format was flawed. Without the threat of elimination, the competitive element was missing and the matches were always susceptible to accusations that the results were either fixed or the players lacked incentive. Tilden’s idea was to create a professional league with tournament play.

Over the years, calls had gone up to open tournaments to both amateur and professional players, but the ruling amateur establishment staunchly opposed all such proposals, arguing that to do so would sully the “purity” of competition. Honor and purity, however, had little to do with it. The system of under-the-table payoffs that amateur officials defended was simply *de facto* professionalism. What really was at stake was power and control over the game, which amateur officials clung to through their stranglehold on the major tennis events—the national championships and the Davis Cup—and their clever manipulation of the divisions between the players, the fans, the media, and each other.

Few clubs would risk the wrath of the amateur establishment by hosting a professional tournament during the amateur season. For example, when Perry and Ellsworth Vines took their tour to Europe in the summer of 1937, the tour nearly died when the British Lawn Tennis Association forbade any affiliate club to host the matches. The tour was rescued by the hasty construction of a portable wooden court that was hauled around to various outdoor football grounds rather than tennis clubs.

The resulting logistics of touring made it impossible to host full-fledged professional tournaments. As a result, the tours evolved into head-to-head contests between the reigning professional champion and the top amateur challenger. Usually a warm-up match between two lesser players preceded the feature match—the “animal act,” as it was known inside the tour. To avoid competing head-on with the more recognized amateur game, the pro tours took place primarily during the winter months. After the tour, the next top amateur player would be signed for the next year.

By his sheer energy and presence, however, Tilden managed to put together what no one before could: a series of six professional tournaments, starting in Southern California and the Southwest, then moving to the Midwest and East. Tilden did the negotiations, made the deals, got the player commitments, arranged the draw for each tournament, and acted as referee. The players included Bobby, Lester Stoefen, Fred Perry, Wayne Sabin, John Faunce, Frank Kovacs, Gene Mako, and Welby Van Horn. Among the bigger events was a \$10,000 tournament in 1946 in Philadelphia sponsored by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Tilden also managed to land a five-year contract for the World Professional Grass Court Championships to be held at the country’s premier tennis venue, the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills.

Tilden’s perseverance paid off, as many of the events were successful. Some players complained when they learned that Tilden rigged the draws to ensure he advanced to the latest possible round, but Bobby defended the practice. The way he figured, it was less a matter of fairness than good business, as Tilden was still a major gate attraction. After all, professional tennis was largely an extension of the entertainment business.

The tour might have succeeded, too, had not a couple of events intervened. First, in February 1946, after Bobby and Budge’s match in the Pan-Pacific Auditorium, Jack Harris, who promoted the two players’ prewar tour, convinced them to participate in a 25-match head-to-head tour. With that, the tournament tour lost its top two gate attractions. Second, and more important, was Tilden’s conviction and imprisonment on a morals charge in 1947, an event that shocked and saddened the entire tennis world. His arrest in

Los Angeles after being caught with an under-aged male youth made public what had been an open secret among the players. Though Tilden “never made passes at fellow players, as far as I know,” Bobby said, “he was overly fond of ball boys.” Without Tilden, the driving force for the tour was gone. Though a few tournaments he organized continued on their own, without Tilden’s missionary zeal to keep the tour going, plus his ability to bully into line such a diverse group of personalities and egos, the dream of an organized professional tour died. Wrote Bobby: “Pro tennis owes a tremendous debt to Bill.”

Bobby and Budge’s tour in 1946 was billed as a classic battle of styles: the slugger, Budge, versus the clever boxer, Bobby. To the winner of the tour went the title and the opportunity to headline the next tour. The loser would be left on the sidelines. Budge, 31, knew he was in the twilight of his career and that this could be his last real chance to cash in on his legendary status. But without his accustomed power on the serve, and frustrated by errors on his overheads, Budge found balls he used to put away with ease against Bobby coming back. It unnerved him and he changed tactics, trying to rally with Bobby from the baseline, exchanging drop shots and lobs. Instead of outslugging Bobby, he wound up trying to beat Bobby at Bobby’s game.

Opening March 9, 1946, in Chicago before 7,811 spectators, Bobby won a tense five-set match. As the 25-match tour moved east, Bobby charged out to a 13-2 lead, leaving Budge no chance of overtaking him. Bobby’s dominance worried promoters in the lucrative East Coast markets of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Pittsburgh, who saw interest in the tour wane and their gate receipts collapse. “What the devil is happening?” they complained to tour publicity director Jack Miller. “Tell Riggs to ease up on Budge. Good gosh, man, do you realize such successive beatings are killing the gate?”

A fellow player approached Bobby after a stop in Providence, R.I. “Bobby, why don’t you let Don win a couple of matches? You’re leading him eleven matches to one. It’s killing the crowds, and you’re not being fair to the other members of the foursome [Wayne

Sabin and John Faunce played the preliminary match], who stand to get a handsome bonus when the series is over—that is, if good crowds make it possible for promoter Jack Harris to have any of that folding money to pass around.”

After reportedly telling this person to mind his own business, Bobby agreed to extend the tour to 46 matches. Meanwhile, Budge cast off his vanity and started wearing glasses on court. He also adjusted his playing style. He whittled Bobby’s lead, ending just two matches back, 22 wins to Bobby’s 24. Still, the tour was only a moderate financial success, with an average attendance of 3,425 per stop.

For Bobby, all that remained was to win the season-ending U.S. Professional Championships at Forest Hills. This, he figured, would be the crowning jewel of his ascendancy as world pro champion. It was a moment for which he had planned since Budge dismantled him at the professional championships in 1942, and no one could have been more motivated. On the other side of the court, however, Budge figured that if he could win the title at Forest Hills, he might salvage what remained of his standing as defending champion, or at least keep himself in contention. Besides, he was still an immensely popular figure and the heavy sentimental favorite going into the tournament.

As expected, both Budge and Bobby reached the final, with most fans still expecting Budge to win. Despite the tour results, the years off during the war, and Budge’s injury, “Big Red” was still considered the all-conquering king, the irresistible force, while Bobby was, as always, seen as the pesky upstart.

In less than an hour, it was over. To the stunned disbelief of the 10,000 spectators packed into the horseshoe-shaped stadium at the West Side Tennis Club, Bobby dismantled Budge in straight sets, 6-3, 6-1, 6-1. For three games in the opening set, Budge looked ready to prove himself the same indomitable player people had known, turning a 0-2 deficit into a 3-2 advantage. But things then went badly awry, as he made error after error: missed overheads, netted volleys, drives hit wide or beyond the baseline. For his part, Bobby played solidly and with purpose, but this was not the Budge the fans expected, or even the Budge Bobby expected. Fans could

hardly believe their eyes. At the awards presentation, Budge made a brief speech. He told the fans how sorry he was that he had let them down so badly, and promised to come back the following year and reward their dedication. Years later, recalling that year and his disastrous 2-13 start against Bobby on that tour, Budge said he preferred to remember that in his last days as pro champion he won 20 matches to Bobby's 11.

Despite his success, Bobby's mastery over Budge mattered little. With Tilden's dream of a series of professional tournaments falling apart and the amateur game yet to get back on its feet, there was nothing for him to do. Until a legitimate amateur champion emerged, there was no one for him to play against, and the U.S. public had little interest in another tour between him and Budge, leaving Bobby to bide his time.

At the National Indoor Professional Championships in Philadelphia in the spring of 1947—the tournament organized by Tilden the previous year—Bobby crushed Budge again, 6-1, 8-6, 6-3. Afterwards, the two agreed to a series of head-to-head tours in South Africa and Europe by promoter Jack Harris. Bobby again edged Budge, 12-6. Upon returning, Bobby himself sponsored a brief tour with Frank Kovacs, still a powerful player and a popular gate attraction. But after turning professional, Kovacs had lost his sunny good nature. The “Clown Prince” had since become more bitter and caustic, intimidating ball boys, showing up late for matches, and offering to fight heckling spectators. At the Philadelphia tournament, Kovacs swigged from a large soda bottle full of Rum Collins mix during the changeovers. When he finished the bottle, he sent a ball boy out for a refill. When the boy came back with plain soda, Kovacs held up the match while he waited for the youngster to go out and retrieve the requested libation. Bobby finished their brief tour on top, four matches to three.

By 1947, with the amateur game reorganized, the eyes of the tennis world were on a hot young player named Jack Kramer. One of Perry Jones' “golden boys” back at the L.A. Tennis Club, Kramer was tall and handsome. Moreover, like Budge and Ellsworth Vines, he had a big game, an attacking, serve-and-volley style that was exciting to watch. Forget Bobby's dominance over Kramer when

the two youths played against each other at the L.A. Tennis Club. (Once, after having won 27 straight games against Kramer, Bobby told his frustrated friend: “Look, kid. I know you’re gonna be a player sometime and we’re gonna meet and I just want you to know now who’s boss.”) Forget that before the war Bobby could beat Kramer nine times out of 10.

In 1946, Kramer lost just two matches. He won Forest Hills and anchored the United States team in its dramatic victory over Australia in Melbourne to regain the Davis Cup. He likely would have won Wimbledon that year had blisters not hampered him on his racquet hand. In 1947, Kramer was expected to win both Wimbledon and Forest Hills. It was clear he would be the star of the next pro tour, which was expected to make a fortune.

Bobby was the reigning professional champion. By all rights, the tour was his. But the public and the promoter, Jack Harris, clearly had their sights set on a tour that pitted Budge, the Great One, against Kramer, the second coming of Budge. From a commercial standpoint, Budge was so well known, so popular, and had such a terrific record that promoter Harris decided to tip the scales in favor of Budge by declaring that the winner of the 1947 U. S. Professional Championships at Forest Hills would get the opportunity to tour with Kramer. With all the marbles riding on that one tournament, Bobby called it “the \$100,000 plum.” The winner got the tour and the \$100,000. The loser went home with nothing.

On a hot, muggy day on the grass at Forest Hills, the two men met in the final for what turned out to be one of the most important matches of their careers.

The tennis, however, failed to live up to the magnitude of the event. Both players came out tentatively, neither willing to take chances with so much at stake. The result, wrote Bobby, was a display of “mediocre” tennis in which the pair traded the first two sets. Budge won the first comfortably, 6-3. Bobby took the second, also at 6-3. In the third set, Bobby jumped to a 5-2 lead, and for a moment it seemed that Budge might be ready to fold up his game and go home. But he dug in, raised his level of play, and broke Bobby’s serve to even the set, 5-5. Serving at 5-6, Budge then

saved two set points to knot the match at 6-all. Holding serve to even the set again at 7-7, Budge then broke Bobby's serve to go ahead 8-7, giving him the opportunity to serve out the set.

But then Bobby dug in. He broke Budge's serve to even the set, 8-8, held serve, then broke Budge again to win the set, 10-8.

After a 10-minute rest, the players emerged from the locker room after a shower and a change into fresh clothes, Budge jumped to a quick lead and held out to win the fourth set, 6-4.

With everything riding on how well he performed over the next few minutes, Bobby clenched his teeth and gripped his racquet. It was now or never. "I thought of all that money and I swore I'd run my legs off before I'd let it get away from me," he later wrote.

After two and one-half hours, his arms cramping, Bobby used every shot he had—volleys, lobs, drop shots, service aces, and groundstroke placements—to keep Budge at bay. Serving at 3-5 and 0-40 in the fifth set, Budge made a final surge, fighting off three match points. But he followed this with three successive errors, giving Bobby the game, set, and match, 3-6, 6-3, 10-8, 4-6, 6-3. Bobby, not Budge, would tour with Kramer.

Years later, Bobby called this his single greatest moment in tennis.

To his fans, Budge said, "A year ago I told everyone present I'd be back this year and try to make amends. I believe I have. And I'll be back next year."

He did return, but there would be no more chances for the fallen king.

