Dwight Davis—The Man and the Cup


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Most tennis aficionados recognize Dwight Filley Davis as the man who donated an international tennis challenge trophy known as the Davis Cup. Despite this substantial contribution to tennis, his memorable donation most likely obscures his legacy as a civic-minded politician. This well documented book by Nancy Kriplen details parallel histories of Dwight Davis the man and the silver challenge trophy that would become the centerpiece for international team competition in men’s tennis.

Late in the summer of 1899, after observing how the America’s Cup had generated interest in the sport of yachting, Dwight Davis had an epiphany that led him to consider donating a comparable prize for tennis. Convinced that such a competition could foster international goodwill, the 21-year-old Harvard senior arranged for matches to be played between England and the United States the following year. The first Davis Cup competition was held at Longwood Cricket Club (in Brookline, MA) and consisted of two singles matches on the first day of play, followed by a doubles pairing on the second day, and concluding with the reverse order of singles on the third and final day of competition. That same format is utilized today although a record number of countries (142) entered in the year 2002 (see: http://www.itftennis.com/scripts/polls/davis.asp).

In 1900, after winning the first two singles matches, the American tandem of Dwight Davis and Holcombe Ward won the doubles in straight sets to secure the first Davis Cup triumph for the United States. The prize was a cup fashioned by a small New Hampshire silver firm with a reputation for quality—the William B. Durgin Company. As Kriplen noted, this was an “age of trophies and commemorative cups and bowls for all occasions . . . patriotic, romantic, athletic” (p. 47). Indeed, the Davis Cup would come to share its legacy with other international competitions including the America’s Cup (yachting); the Ryder and Walker Cups (golf); and the Stanley Cup (ice hockey). For the artisan who fashioned it, Rowland Rhodes, the cup would become the “most frequently viewed of any of his works and eventually one of the most famous pieces of silver in the world” (p. 47).

Although Dwight Davis would remain involved in tennis for the remainder of his life, his career focus shifted after he graduated from Harvard
and subsequently completed his post-graduate education at Washington University Law School. Davis entered the political arena in an era that was characterized by “corruption, greed, slums and despair in American cities” (p. 8). As an antidote to threats of urban decay, Davis advocated progressivism and the city beautiful movement that sought to develop public playgrounds, in part to assimilate foreign immigrants. As a result of being named commissioner of the St. Louis Park Department in 1911, Davis distinguished himself as the “father of organised athletics in public parks” (p. 95).

When the United States entered World War I, Davis enlisted to serve in the Army’s 35th division in France. As a result of organizing a special unit in the face of enemy fire, he was eventually awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism. Although he lost a 1920 bid for the U.S. Senate, President Calvin Coolidge appointed him to the role of Secretary of War. Davis was eventually replaced in that position when Coolidge was re-elected in 1928, but was subsequently appointed to the role of Governor General of the Philippines. As in previous positions, Davis’ tenure was characterized by a determination to root out political corruption. In 1935, Davis would join the private policy research organization known as the Brookings Institute in Washington D.C., where he contributed research expertise on a variety of topics. Davis died of myocardial failure in 1945 at the age of 66.

This historical rendering of Davis’ biography is well documented as evidenced by the 37 pages of notes and bibliographic references. This biographical account is no small feat given that Kriplen outlined parallel historical trajectories of an international competition as well as an international political figure. It was a most informative read for me as a former competitive player, tennis teacher, and scholar in sport sociology/history. My only regret is that Kriplen did not share more of her own biography so as to explain what prompted her to do the extensive research that led to the publication of this book. There is an indication on the flap that she attended her first Davis Cup matches in 1971. I wondered what circumstances prompted her to do that, whether she has continued to attend, and her impressions of the competition.

In 1990, I attended the Davis Cup final in St. Petersburg, Florida, where the United States defeated Australia, 3-2. The U.S. was engaged in the Gulf War at the time, and I was especially cognizant of the patriotic atmosphere reflected by the crowd, in particular during the singing of Lee Greenwood’s “God bless the U.S.A.” I was somewhat taken aback to later read criticisms of American fans for lacking the passion that accompanies Davis Cup competitions in other parts of the world. Players from the United States have likewise been criticized for not making the Davis Cup more of a priority, as reflected by French team captain Yannick Noah’s comments in 1996 at Malmö after winning what was considered by many to be the “most dramatic final in Davis Cup history” (p. 210). According to Noah, what is unique