Prologue

A CUP FOR THE AGES

Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club, Melbourne, 30 December 1953: the Davis Cup was on the line. The United States led Australia two rubbers to one in the Challenge Round, the final round. Australia needed to win both remaining singles matches to retain the Cup. In the first of the reverse singles, nineteen-year-old Australian tyro Lew Hoad was to play the world's No. 1, Tony Trabert. At the time, I was a skinny, tennis-mad fifteen-year-old bush kid with bandy legs, a shock of Ginger Meggs hair and 46,000 freckles, and, like millions of Australians, I was tuned in to the radio.

Outside, our rough-and-ready tennis court baked and shimmered in the north Queensland heat. Inside, in the cool of the lounge room, my mother, Melba, father, Roy, sister, Lois, and brothers, Trevor and Bob, and I were clustered in front of the wireless set, surrounded by the scattered green and red detritus of Christmas, as the radio announcer broadcast every serve, volley and backhand. Around the country, streets, beaches and picnic grounds that would usually be heaving with holiday-makers were deserted as, in that era before television and

transistor radios, folks clustered around their radios at home and work and in pubs, cafes and clubs. During the Hoad–Trabert match, police were called to control over-exuberant fans at bursting-to-the-seams venues that were broadcasting the match. A tram stopped in its tracks outside the courts at Kooyong and the conductor climbed onto the roof to see the scoreboard and update his passengers on proceedings.

Australia was the reigning holder of the Davis Cup, symbol since 1900 of world amateur tennis supremacy, but Harry Hopman hadn't seemed to give his players much of a chance before the tie began. When asked by reporters how Hoad and Rosewall would fare against the Americans, he ingenuously offered in his reedy drawl, 'I think they'll do well, but I don't want to say how well . . . in case they disappoint you.'

The results so far reflected Hopman's sentiments. When Lew Hoad went out to play Tony Trabert on the third day of the 1953 Challenge Round, a US victory would give the Americans an unbeatable lead in the best-of-five match series, and within days the silverware would be on the first available plane back to New York. On the first day of the Cup tie in the opening singles match, Lew had beaten the US No. 2 player, Vic Seixas, in straight sets, 6–4, 6–2, 6–3, then Tony Trabert evened the ledger by defeating diminutive nineteen-year-old Ken Rosewall just as decisively—6–3, 6–4, 6–4—after Ken dropped his opening serve and made a series of nervous errors, one swat even missing the ball completely. Next day, in the doubles, Tony and Vic destroyed Lew and Victorian farm lad Rex 'Wrecker' Hartwig, who were teaming for the first time, 6–2, 6–4, 6–4 in just 58 minutes. In what the newspapers were calling 'the greatest blunder in tennis history', Australia's Davis Cup captain, Harry Hopman, had been overruled by Lawn Tennis Association of Australia (LTAA)

officials Sir Norman Brookes, Esca Stephens, Don Ferguson, Cliff Sproule and T.E. Robinson who chose Hartwig ahead of Ken Rosewall. They feared Ken might still be shattered by his singles loss to Trabert. In calling Ken's omission a blunder, the papers might have been right, because that year Lew and Ken, nicknamed the 'Tennis Twins', went on to win the Australian, French and Wimbledon doubles titles. Sir Norman was unrepentant. 'We took a risk. If we decided on the wrong pair, it is just too bad.'

Now, after the doubles debacle, it was down to Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall in their respective singles matches against Tony Trabert and Vic Seixas. The odds were against the youngsters, and not just because of their age and relative inexperience. In the 53-year history of the Cup, only three times had a Challenge Round been won by a team that had trailed two matches to one.

As the capacity crowd of 17,500 rose as one, Hoad and Trabert entered the court, on their heels the Australian non-playing captain Harry Hopman, small and bird-like, hair slicked flat, natty in his blazer and trousers, and Hopman's American counterpart Bill Talbert, a past multiple grand slam and Davis Cup winner. Unlike steamy, sweltering Rockhampton where I was listening, the weather at Kooyong, 2000 kilometres to the south, was cool with intermittent drizzle. Centre court, already churned by the previous matches, was treacherously slippery. Some spectators were perched in new 21-metre-high temporary wooden grandstands, completed just days before to accommodate the anticipated huge crowd. Courtside were Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Victoria's Governor Sir Dallas Brooks, and the US ambassador to Australia, the wonderfully named Amos J. Peaslee. The Southern Command army brass band pumped out the national

anthems and a selection of patriotic songs. Film of the gallery at Kooyong that day 66 years ago shows a preponderance of middle-aged men in white straw hats or felt fedoras, jacket and tie, furiously smoking cigarettes and shelling peanuts, and women of a similar age in floral design frocks, and, in optimistic defiance of the drizzle, sun-hats and sunglasses.

Sydneysider Lewis Alan Hoad, stocky, snowy-haired, movie-star handsome, strolled onto the court wearing a white cardigan over his white cotton shirt, smiling up into the stands where sat his parents, Bonnie and Alan, and his girlfriend, Jenny Staley. If Lew was nervous, he wasn't about to let his opponent know it. Tall, crew-cut Tony Trabert hardly acknowledged the crowd, just plonked his kitbag and racquets down beside Talbert at the side of the court, all business and steely resolve. As the reigning Wimbledon singles champion, and having beaten Rosewall in the opening day singles two days before, the 23-year-old's confidence today was justified. Although both men were cheered, the punters had anointed Hoad their hero—by then Lew was certainly mine—and cast Tony Trabert, as good a bloke and sport as he was a player, as their villain.

Lew's Davis Cup teammates—Rosewall, Hartwig and Merv Rose—watched the match from the players' enclosure. Frank Sedgman and Ken McGregor were in the grandstand. The young Neale Fraser, Ashley Cooper, Mal Anderson, Fred Stolle and Tony Roche, possibly polishing off Christmas Day leftovers, were glued to radios in various parts of the country. Roy Emerson was tuned in at his family's dairy farm in Blackbutt, Queensland. Like me, John Newcombe listened to the match sprawled on his family's lounge-room floor. At the end, Newk turned to his parents and said, 'I'd like to be like Lew and Ken.'

'Play,' called the chair umpire, and from the opening serve Lew and Tony attacked. Both were blessed with a booming serve; it was power serve-and-volley tennis, a war of attrition, each man seeking to dictate play, crowding the net and driving his opponent back to the baseline. Both players slipped and fell on the greasy surface. To the crowd's approval, Lew won the first two sets, 13–11 (no tie breaks then) and 6–3, his searing serves, cracking volleys and perfect shot placement too much for Trabert, who, although playing well, was finding himself over-powered and out-manoeuvred. In the third set, the American, now wearing spiked shoes and more sure-footed, surged and wrested control. Now it was Lew who couldn't take a trick as Tony wiped the court with him. Lew swapped his regular shoes for ones with spiked soles to better grip the surface, but could not stop Tony from winning the third and fourth sets, 6–2, 6–3. The Australian's shoulders slumped as he took position for the fifth and match-deciding set.

Trabert's dominance continued. More used to spikes than Lew, he was holding his serve without difficulty and dealing better with the heavy balls. Lew, on the other hand, was finding it hard to set himself when serving, which reduced his power, and he ran gingerly, trying to keep his balance.

Then came the moment that, folklore has it, changed the course of the match. Early in the fifth set with Lew seemingly destined for defeat, he forgot he was wearing spikes and slid to reach a Trabert return. The spikes, whose very purpose was to prevent sliding, dug into the turf and Lew tumbled headlong and lay face down. Everyone at Kooyong and listening around the nation gasped at once. Was he hurt? Had he knocked himself unconscious? Then, after what seemed an age lying motionless on the grass, Lew hammered the

ground with his racquet in humiliation and frustration. Enter Harry Hopman. The skipper, never known for his sense of humour, casually threw a white towel over his player's head and barked, 'Aw, get up, you lazy bastard!' At that, Lew raised his head and flashed a grin, Hopman laughed, the fans laughed, even Tony Trabert, who must have hoped that Lew would have to forfeit, gave a thin smile. He smiled too soon. According to Hopman, Lew's fall and his own reaction to it changed the momentum of the match. (Lew would disagree; he always said he got on top when, after he broke a racquet string in the fifth set, he changed to a new, dry racquet from which the ball flew faster.)

Whatever the reason, Lew found his form and played the best aggressive serve-and-volley tennis he ever had in his life. He roared from behind to lead 6–5. Lew smashed winning volleys off Trabert's weakening returns. Then the flustered American double-faulted, which, to both players' dismay, brought unseemly cheers from some in the crowd. At set, and match point, a frantic rally ensued, which ended when Lew chipped a gentle return that floated to the turf and died where it fell. Tony had nothing to hit. Set and match to Hoad and Australia: 13–11, 6–3, 2–6, 3–6, 7–5 in just on three hours. At two rubbers all ('rubber' is Davis Cup parlance for a match) Australia was still in the tie.

The crowd at Kooyong whooped and hollered, hugged each other, wept and hurled rubber cushions, hats and newspapers into the air while the physically and mentally exhausted players shook hands at the net. Lew flashed a Churchillian V sign to his mother and Jenny (Hoad Snr, overwrought and nervous, had had to rush to the toilet and didn't make it back in time for the end of the match). A press photographer rushed to Lew and slid three metres in the mud, like

a silent movie comedian coming to grief on a banana skin. Harry Hopman commiserated with the American team and apologised for the unsporting catcalls from the spectators. By now the crowd had been cheering and throwing things for five minutes. An exasperated plea came over the PA system for people to quieten. 'Why should we?' cried one fan. 'We're going to win the Davis Cup!' Up in Rocky, I whooped and hollered, too, and, like young Newk down in Sydney, dared to dream that one day I'd represent my country in the Davis Cup, and do Australia proud as Lew Hoad had just done.

On my bookshelf is Lew's first autobiography, *My Game*. In it he recalled what happened after his victory. 'I stood in the centre of the court and gave the V sign, and when the umpire announced the scores, people bellowed, "Let's hear them again!" Cushions landed like confetti on the court, and,

> I walked in a haze to my chair and Hopman put my jacket on and lifted my numb legs and scrubbed my spikes, and when I looked around to Trabert he was crying . . . I was dripping from perspiration and raindrops and I walked off the court in my spikes alongside Hopman, and as we disappeared into the dressing room, a man in the gallery yelled at the Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, who had seen every shot of it, and said, 'Give him a knighthood, Bob—Bradman didn't ever do anything like that.'

Many who saw it, or heard it, believe that this was the greatest tennis match ever played.

Even though I would experience many wonderful encounters in the years to come, and I was able to experience the Hoad–Trabert match only on the radio, I'd have to class it,

because of its crucial nature, the atmosphere, and the fact that we saw two of the best players ever, as a classic.

The Davis Cup tie now stood even at two matches each. Because rain had caused the postponement of the fifth match, the reverse singles between Rosewall and Seixas, which would decide which country won the Cup, was played on a fourth day, 31 December. Anyone who thought Ken would be traumatised by his earlier singles loss to Trabert would have reconsidered had they seen the Tennis Twins in their hotel room on the morning of the match. Newsreel footage shows Ken, in pyjamas and dressing gown, on a lounge chair, eating a hearty breakfast and looking anything but nervous as he holds up a newspaper whose headline reads: 'Will Nerves Upset Ken's Cup Victory Bid?' Enter Lew Hoad, in a loud Hawaiian shirt, sporting his lopsided crinkly grin. Lew grabs Ken and they rumble about on a bed, the former giving the latter a playful shove.

Kenny, cool as you like and suffering no discernible lingering trauma, went out that afternoon and beat Vic Seixas 6–2, 2–6, 6–3, 6–4 to keep the Davis Cup on our shores for another year.

Sir Dallas Brooks, in presenting the trophy to Harry Hopman and his team, declared that he and the fans had just witnessed tennis of 'great skill, great courage, great endurance, and great fighting spirit'. He lauded the victors. 'Yesterday will go down in Australia as "Hoad's Day" and today, New Year's Eve, will be known as "Rosewall's Day".'

Hopman responded, 'What a terrific struggle this has been. I've been on the sidelines and feel the strain pretty badly and I can only regret that I could not enjoy the tennis as the gallery has.' He then proceeded to heap more praise on Lew and Ken than he had ever done to their faces in all

the years he'd been mentoring them. 'Hoad and Rosewall were magnificent. I don't know of any other two babies who could turn out such tennis as they have done these past two days.' Ken squirmed with embarrassment as Hop continued, '"Little Muscles" as we call Ken, is so much a baby we had to get his mother over. He slept soundly last night when he knew she was coming to look after him. I might be a tennis father to him but I can't be a mother as well.' When called upon to speak, Lew begged off, quipping that babies should not have to make long speeches, so he quickly thanked his captain and handed the microphone to Ken who mumbled, 'It has been a great thrill and it's gone off beautiful.'

Later, Tony Trabert rued that the United States had been beaten 'by two babes and a fox'—'the Old Fox' being one of Hop's more publishable nicknames.

To me, that spellbinding match between Lew and Tony Trabert at Kooyong in 1953 heralded the golden era of Australian tennis. Australia's record in men's and women's singles and doubles and mixed doubles in the four mighty annual amateur grand slam championships—the Australian, the French, Wimbledon and the United States—between 1952 and 1973, which, although Frank Sedgman had been winning titles since 1949, I've designated as the golden era, as a tribe of Australians came to prominence and dominated tennis like no nation before or since.

In grand slam men's singles during that 22-year period, Australians won 58, or 65.9 per cent, of the 88 finals they contested, and 40, or 45.4 per cent, of those finals were all-Australian affairs. Australian men won 62, or 70.4 per cent, of the 88 doubles finals in which they competed. And don't forget that all of us, with the exception of Neale Fraser, who never turned professional, were ineligible to compete in

amateur grand slam tournaments, also known as the Majors, for varying periods because we had turned pro. Ken and Lew were barred from grand slams from 1956 and 1957 respectively until 1968 when open tennis was established, and I was exiled from '63 to '68. These were the years when we were at our peak. How many more titles would have been won by Australians if we'd been allowed to play? In women's tennis, Margaret Court from 1960 till 1973 was a one-woman juggernaut, winning 24 singles crowns on her own.

What a time it was.