

While Critics Cry, He Wins

by Ed Fitzgerald



A MATEUR TENNIS is a stuffy sport that needs a shot of dash and color like a hamburger needs ketchup. Alex Olmedo, the current glamour boy and stormy petrel of the game, is just what the doctor ordered. Whether he's sweeping through the field to win the Wimbledon Championship, or creating a furor by refusing even to try in a first-round match in the recent National Clay Courts Championships, and thus inviting the wrath of the powers that be, Olmedo makes news. He's the most colorful and controversial player since Big Bill Tilden.

Olmedo brought the Davis Cup back to the United States from Australia last January virtually singlehandedly. He whipped two great players, Mal Anderson and Ashley Cooper, in the singles matches and teamed with Ham Richardson in the doubles to beat Anderson and Neale Fraser. Thus he won two points by himself and shared mightily in winning the third as the U.S. team took the series and the Cup, 3-2.

Ordinarily that would have caused widespread celebrating back home in the States since the Australians had monopolized the Cup, symbol of international tennis supremacy, for five years. The trouble is that Olmedo, who won the Cup, is a citizen of Peru, not the United States. But because he has lived here for five years and is a citizen of a country which doesn't have a Davis Cup team, Alex was technically eligible to represent the U.S. However, a lot of Americans took a dim view of the largest nation in the competition stooping to borrow a player from littler Peru to win the Cup.

"This would seem to be the saddest day in the history of American tennis," sports columnist Arthur Daley wrote in the *New York Times*. "A few more such rousing victories and the prestige of this country in tennis will sink to a new low."

Poor Alex found himself the center of a controversy that isn't likely to die for a long time. "I feel great. I feel happy," he said after he won the Cup. But in almost the same breath he had to explain patiently why he hadn't filed for American citizenship, why he was quite content to remain a citizen of Peru, and to deny that he was ducking U.S. citizenship to avoid being drafted into the Army.

Any country would be glad to have the dark-haired, handsome South American with flashing white teeth, quick smile and cannonball serve. Other tennis players call him "The Chief," in deference to his Inca blood. Among the players he's as popular as any amateur on the circuit. A bachelor, he maintains a comfortable two-room apartment near the campus of the University of Southern California, which he attends on a scholarship.

Even as a little boy growing up in Arequipa, Peru, Alex's whole life was built around tennis. His father Salvatore was

caretaker of the tennis club in Arequipa, and Alex helped work on the courts, served as a ballboy and got in as much playing as he could get away with. When he was 14, he borrowed a racquet from his father's stock and entered a men's singles tournament. His father probably would have given him a good spanking for taking the racquet without permission, but Alex had the good sense to win the tournament.

After that it was all uphill for the Chief. Jorge Harten, a Peruvian coffee millionaire who loved tennis, imported a U.S. professional, Stan Singer, to improve the caliber of play in the country. Singer was impressed by young Olmedo, and he arranged for the boy to go to the United States.

He was able to pay part of his passage by working as a cabin boy and, after a three-week trip, he landed with about \$200 in his pocket. His destination was Los Angeles, where tennis enthusiasm runs strongest in the U.S., and he prudently bought a ticket on a cross-country bus. When he arrived, he still had a little more than \$100. "My biggest trouble," he says now, "is that I couldn't speak English. All I knew how to say was 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'Coke, please.'"

ALEX GOT A JOB in the pro shop at the Poinsettia Public Park Tennis Club, and before long his playing earned him a scholarship at Modesto Junior College. Soon after amateur tennis bigwigs spotted him, he moved to U.S.C. on a scholarship, and his every move was watched carefully. Coach George Toley instructed him in tennis strokes and strategy and filled in for Alex's absent father.

The boy developed quickly. In 1956 he won the national intercollegiate singles championship, a victory he won again in 1958. Playing frequently as a guest of Toley at the Los Angeles Tennis Club, he benefited handsomely from practice matches with such tennis greats as Pancho Gonzales, Jack Kramer and Ted Schroeder.

"That guy is going to wind up with the fastest serve in tennis," Gonzales said admiringly. And all the big boys agreed that the Chief was moving swiftly into the top flight. They wanted him badly enough for the Davis Cup team to pick him over a storm of opposition, and they felt vindicated when he did the job.

Whatever happens to him as far as future Davis Cup competition is concerned, Alex's tennis future seems secure. He already has won the Australian singles championship, the Wimbledon crown, and the U.S. indoor title. And he'll probably win the big one which will be held Aug. 28-30 at Forest Hills, N. Y. After that the only thing left for him to do will be to turn professional and make half a million dollars. The Chief is ready.

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