

From the chapter

## A NEW GANG IN TOWN

“If you saw this whole circus from the outside you’d get angry.”

BJÖRN BORG

“We want to decriminalise cancer,” said the promoter, a balding man with a moustache and a dogtooth check jacket.

“Sick people shouldn’t have to feel worthless and excluded from society.”

Björn Borg sat – or rather reclined – in a chair beside the promoter and seemed about to drift off to sleep. The third man on the podium, a film producer, pledged that the money would be coming from him. It would be raised at Gothenburg’s Scandinavium arena, where the 19-year-old Swedish tennis whizz was to meet the Australian legend Rod Laver in a gimmick match.

Mr. Dogtooth said he was planning on selling the TV rights to both the US and Australia. He pledged: “50 per cent of profits will go to cancer patients. 50 per cent will go to me as promoter and risk-taker. McCormack, Björn’s agent, has approved the proposal.”

Björn Borg nodded, was asked by the journalists whether challenge matches like this were good for the sport, and said: “You can’t have too many or all the money ends up in the pockets of just a few players. But this match, between me and Laver at Scandinavium, is set to be something special.”

A reporter turned to the promoter:

“Have the TV negotiations been finalised? Is the income confirmed?”

The promoter lit a cigarette.

“Not exactly.”

Hubris was stacked against scepticism in the Scandinavium press room that overcast morning.

Mr. Dogtooth was renowned for his unscrupulous habit of involving cancer patients in projects which in recent years had involved galas featuring well-known retired boxers. The producer’s latest film had tried to reinstate the career of that fading star of the Swedish entertainment world, Anita Lindblom. But a match between Borg and Laver was bound to be a success.

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A reporter from the *Göteborgs-Posten* newspaper wrote sourly that “No one knows how much the profits will be, so the national association of cancer patients will have to wait a while before they find out how much they’ll be lining their coffers with. The winning tennis player need be in no doubt at all, though. He can be sure of a tidy 500,000 kronor to line his pockets. From the pockets of the wealthy... no player’s worth that much.”

It was 1975, late autumn. Sweden’s Social Democrats were in their forty-fourth consecutive year in government. During that year – the one designated International Women’s Year by the UN – Olof Palme’s government had not only continued their reform policies, they’d picked up the pace. Legal abortion for women up to their twelfth week. Paid parental leave claimable by both mothers and fathers. Shared custody for mothers and fathers after a divorce. Union participation in workplace decision-making enshrined in the law. The economy also seemed to be faring well: the OECD praised Sweden, and all sides in the labour market had reached an unprecedented agreement on 30 per cent salary increases over two years. Towards the end of the summer, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation proposed that the trade unions should be guaranteed majority shareholdings in all companies with over 100 employees. “Social reforms without socialism” was the Liberal People’s Party’s political slogan. The Centre Party, the largest centre-right party, based its election manifesto on the decommissioning of nuclear power.

Everyone seemed to be a social democrat. Apart from Björn Borg. Not that anyone suspected that he harboured any burning political convictions. He just followed his own path. When he left Sweden for Monaco earlier that year, he’d made no attempt to conceal his motivation: “to keep my money from lining the taxman’s pockets. Ninety per cent is too much.” Björn had bought a flat for himself in Monte Carlo and one for his parents right next door.

Tanned after a safari trip to Kenya with his coach Lennart Bergelin and his girlfriend Helena Anliot, he stayed in the press room while the promoter and the producer left to go and make sure an advert with a picture of Björn and the text: “THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT – challenge match at Scandinavium, ½ million kronor for the winner. Book now!” was on its way to the *Göteborgs-Posten*. For Björn, the press conference in Gothenburg was just a sideshow. He was in Sweden to take part in the two most important competitions that had ever taken place on Swedish soil, both to be held in Stockholm over the following weeks. First the Masters, the season finale for the world’s best pros, followed by the Davis Cup final, Sweden’s first ever, against Czechoslovakia.

Björn stayed and chatted with the journalists about his holiday: “It was one of the most wonderful breaks I’ve ever had. It was the most beautiful country I’ve been to, ever. Those nights out in the bush – we lay in tents, and heard all those strange noises very, very close, out in the night somewhere. You know it’s nice to feel really small once in a while.”

This last comment gave an unexpected glimpse of the 19-year-old star’s inner life. But the journalists couldn’t hold themselves back:

“How’s your form ahead of next week?”

“Not that great. I played with a few Kenyans down there but they weren’t that great,” Björn replied.

“If you win the Masters you’ll be world number one this year. What do you think about that?”

“I don’t think about it. That ranking stuff’s not my job.”

There’d been tennis pros in Sweden before, but never to play a tournament of such prestige. Borg was asked how important the Masters was and explained it like a patient scout leader: “Wimbledon is biggest, then the US Open in Forest Hills, and then the French, then comes the Masters and the WCT final. They’re the biggest competitions we have in tennis.”

The ‘we’ in Björn’s comment – that was Björn and his gang. If he got a somewhat chilly reception for leaving the country for the sake of his tax bill, the Masters made up for it, and then some. The fact that Stockholm was hosting the super-tournament came down, of course, to Borg’s success, and to the tennis hysteria that had gripped the Swedish populace. Audience ratings for the radio broadcasts of the previous year’s Masters in Melbourne had reached the headquarters of the tennis bigwigs in New York; they showed half the population of Sweden staying up all night to listen to Borg’s long matches. Tennis was the ‘in’ sport of the day, holding the Masters in Stockholm was the best way to ride the wave. Over 100 foreign tennis journalists were booked into hotels in the capital.

For the whole of Monday afternoon, a few dozen men in overalls worked re-laying the courts in the Kungliga Tennishallen arena. The new carpet had been flown in from the US and had a slow bounce. The colour was forest green inside the white lines, and red outside. On the Tuesday morning, as the wintery sunlight filtered through the windows in the building’s curved roof, the arena glittered in its new, glorious Christmas colours. At one o’clock, the first player arrived. The Argentinian Guillermo Vilas, that year’s number one on the Grand Prix list, struggled out of his sheepskin, hung it over one of the chairs by the side of the court and fished a

bag of sand out of his bag. The sand had been collected by Vilas from one of the beaches in Mar del Plata. He always took a bagful when he travelled overseas.

Before going out onto the court, he warmed up with a few minutes' gymnastics. His leg muscles coiled like thick snakes round his thighs. Then he hit a ball back and forth for a while with his trainer and sparring partner, the Romanian Ion Țiriac, but soon left the court, stuffed the bag of sand back into his bag, put his sheepskin and rackets under his arm and headed for the restaurant. There, he ordered steak, fries and a Coca-Cola, as he once again hung his coat over the back of a chair. To Țiriac he said: "If I lose this in this climate, it'll be the end of me."

Soon, more players turned up. Arthur Ashe, the reigning Wimbledon champion, arrived swathed in a black bearskin coat he'd just bought in a top Stockholm department store, turning the heads of two female players just heading into another court. By contrast, Manuel Orantes, the Spaniard who'd won at Forest Hills earlier that autumn, got out of his car in a cropped jacket, and the Romanian, Ilie Năstase, who'd won the Masters three out of the last four years, came in wearing a green tracksuit with his rackets under his arm. Năstase and Ashe were accompanied on the centre court by the recent Stockholm Open winner Adriano Panatta, who pointed out to Ashe that the ladies outside were making eyes at his fur. Ashe smiled and said:

"Have you ever seen a well-dressed Swede?"

The three of them had a gentle warm-up session together.

When Vilas had finished his lunch, Borg turned up, changed, and came back out in yellow shorts and a white t-shirt, then accompanied Vilas to the far side-court, where they each took their baseline. Vilas whipped in his topspun groundstroke. Borg's feet danced.

As the tennis pros were getting out of their limousines, six boys and three girls at Sättra school in south-west Stockholm got up from their seats with a clatter of chair legs. They took their tennis rackets, slung their bags over their shoulders and left their Swedish lesson. Half an hour later, they were standing around on the three courts in a tent by Mälärhöjdens sports ground. The PE teacher called out the three golden rules of tennis: "Eyes on the ball! Move your feet! And for God's sake – sideways onto the net when you take a shot!"

Tennis as a free choice activity was new this term, and the course filled up quickly. Those who didn't get on the list had to content themselves with badminton; in the school's own sportshall, the other PE teacher taught long and short serves. The students were keen to learn, but when it came to stroke technique, there

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was no teacher in the world who could stop them following their own rules – Borg had taught them it was OK to ignore well-meaning advice and do what felt best for you.

So the badminton players let the shuttlecock float down toward the ground, squatted down, turned sideways to the net, focused hard and punched back a heavily topspun double-backhand.

Sätra was a young suburb. The very image of the Swedish welfare state, where different social classes lived at close quarters but still a little separately. The school was in the middle, everyone went there. From the terrace houses came the daughters of the Liberal People's Party's Ola Ullsten, and the sons of the chairman of the Swedish Union of Journalists. From the tower blocks came the glue boys who hung out in the shopping arcade and the girls who went to the youth centre. The ice hockey legend Rolle Stoltz waved at everyone as he wandered home with his shopping.

But it was no longer ice hockey, nor football, that was teenagers' favourite sport. In the renovated Sätra sports ground, all eight tennis courts were consistently fully-booked. In order to meet demand, the leisure department decided to repaint the ice hockey rinks as tennis courts in the summer.

The clearest example of this new passion was in casual sports participation – in the yards around tower blocks and in between the parking garages and car parks of the low-rise estates. Cars were backed into garages and tennis courts were measured out and chalked up in the car parks. When a hard forehand whizzed past an opponent and with a muted thud dented the body of a newly-bought Saab 99, there was a short silence. Then you promised to take it a bit easier. Property wasn't the be-all and end-all.

By the summer of 1975, the residents of one estate had already started on the year's second estate tournament, starting with thirty-two players. Pretty much everyone took part, regardless of age. The woman who worked as a secretary for the local mechanics knocked out the high court judge in the first round but then met her match in the form of a long-haired 15-year old. The newly-divorced youth worker fell to the estate manager, and a 13-year old made it through to the final but had no chance against an architect with an austere goatee and expert ball control.

One of Sätra's many tennis-mad teenagers was Mats Törnwall, who was in the last year of Sätra school in 1975. Today he works as a stockbroker for a bank at Stureplan in Stockholm. In 1975 he was sure of one thing: he wasn't going to work in a bank like his father, he was going to be a sports writer, or even better: a tennis player.

“We were inspired by Borg’s garage wall, and in Sättra we had all these underpasses. Me and a mate used to stand there and hit the wall, one shot each until someone missed. Then it was 15-0, and you carried on like that for game, set and match,” Törnwall relates.

Björn Borg, or, as it was usually pronounced: *byurnborry*, with no pause between the fore- and surnames, had changed Sweden. Ingemar Stenmark’s slalom runs could bring the country to a standstill for a few minutes. The national ice hockey and football teams could create moments of euphoria. But Borg got deeper, to a more existential, complex level. You didn’t love him – he seemed too different for that – but you admired him, amazed at what he was achieving with his own two hands, you couldn’t stop thinking about him. And the game he was playing was so fun, but so difficult too.

Free choice activities were something new that had been instituted a few years earlier by then education minister Olof Palme. They were part of a new curriculum that did away with grades in the first and middle schools, did away with grades in orderliness and conduct and with Bible schooling – the latter was replaced with religious studies. Palme believed that the mood of the time called for an education system characterised by enlightenment, equality and content over form. Free choice activities came along for the ride as a way of promoting students’ individual development.

Even before the reform had been fully carried through, Borg had taken that mode of thought to its ultimate conclusion and left school to fulfil his own uncompromising individual path. All interests were equally important for individual development, and seeing the tennis idols who were being honoured in special colour pull-outs in the papers that week was more important than some group project on the Vietnam War for school.

Mats Törnwall and one of his classmates took the metro from Sättra to Gärdet. The doors to the Kungliga Hallen arena were open.

“We bunked off. I still have my autograph book, and I have all the autographs, apart from Borg’s. It wasn’t that we didn’t see him, or that we couldn’t have got it – we could have. But he was in the middle of a half-feud with the Swedish press at that point, and I remember we thought we’d be doing him a favour if we let him be.”

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Borg and Vilas were training flat out. The pace was furious. Borg just retrieved a short drop volley and was close to the net when his groin got in the way of a brutal forehand. The Swede fell to the ground. Vilas cast a look in his direction. Björn lay still. Vilas walked over to the net. Björn lifted an arm. Vilas smiled, lay down on the other side of the net – the two stars exhaled with one breath.

Almost forty years later, Björn Borg still remembers all the expectation – his own and that of the Swedish people – ahead of that tournament. He's still sweating slightly from an intensive training session at the Janne Lundqvist tennis courts in Stockholm. Björn plays here a few times a week to keep in shape. He looks well. His silver-grey hair is combed back, still damp from the shower. The courts, the walls of which are decorated with pictures of Borg himself, are steeped in tennis history.

“It was always important for me to perform well on home turf, in the Stockholm Open and in Båstad. And then the Masters came here with the best eight players in the world, and I'd qualified. I remember playing unbelievably good tennis for a few matches.

“I trained hard with Vilas in the days before the tournament. Incredibly tough sessions. I think I was the first, along with Vilas, to start training that much. He could almost stay on court playing longer than I could, but I was out running more than he was, out in the woods, on hilly tracks, with interval training and stuff like that. Then the others started too. I was possibly the most extreme. But everyone realised it was how you had to do it once they'd seen how much Vilas and I managed.”

Borg and Vilas came from opposite sides of the globe and had become good friends. In addition to the effort they put into training, they both had similar long locks, identical headbands holding those locks in place and a similar playing style – a relentless toil with big groundstrokes from the baseline. For outsiders they still seemed to have more differences than similarities. Vilas was four years older and was portrayed as someone who upheld different ideals to Björn Borg.

That's why, for example, the major Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter* carried a long portrait of Vilas ahead of the tournament. “For Vilas, it's the friendships with other players and the joy of playing that mean most, they're more important than money,” the paper wrote. Vilas was from the Argentinian upper classes, but was a dedicated communist. He walked round with Che Guevara on his t-shirt, read serious books and had even published a book himself, a mix of poetry and essays that was, according to Vilas himself, about “humanity,

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love and loneliness". The arts pages of *Expressen*, another major newspaper, reviewed the book, and *Dagens Nyheter* wrote that it had been well-received in South America, although Argentina's great author Jorge Luis Borges dismissed it as corny: "Vilas writes more or less like I play tennis". A third paper, *Aftonbladet*, described Vilas as "the world's highest-paid poet".

"Do you have the same killer instinct as Björn?" *Dagens Nyheter* asked.

"Killer instinct is just a word," Vilas said. "When you're on the court it's not killing you're thinking about"

"You read and write a lot?"

"Yes, but the idea that I prefer Dostoyevsky to anyone else is wrong. I want to take this opportunity to refute that claim. My favourite writer's called Khalil Gibran. Right now I'm reading his book *El vagabundo*, but his best is *The Prophet*. Check it out!"

Borg was also asked about his reading habits after the training session. Did he still read comic books, the reporter wanted to know. "The fact is," said Björn, "that I haven't read a single comic for a year. Perhaps people's image of me needs dusting off a little."

The reporter asked why Björn had stopped reading comic books. "Why?" Borg said with a laugh. "Well, maybe for the same reason as every other kid who's binned them. They didn't do anything for me anymore."

Translated from the Swedish by Nichola Smalley