



ONCE WERE KINGS

The 1954 Davis Cup was a very good year for Australian tennis. Not only were Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall battling it out on centre court against the ferocious American team of Trabert and Seixas, but high in the stands of Sydney's White City stadium sat two young boys watching their first professional tennis match. These two talented boys would eventually grow up to take the tennis world by storm.

One of them was 10-year-old Sydneysider John Newcombe, who sat with his father on one side of the legendary arena, while on the other side, with his father, was nine-year-old Tony Roche from the NSW country town of Tarcutta. "We didn't know each other at that stage, but I think watching that match had the same effect on us," admits John Newcombe. "The two of us were having our own private dreams about what we would do one day. I know as I watched it,



surprisingly, on the edge of a tennis court as they chat about the glory days of their golden careers. Both young boys from the stands of White City did grow up to fulfil their ambitions by playing on its centre court many, many

overseas trip in 1963 to play against the best the world had to offer.

They provide a good foil for each other. John's personality is more extroverted; he is an expressive man who is keen to tell his tales and

TENNIS GREATS JOHN NEWCOMBE AND TONY ROCHE ARE HAPPY TO RECALL THEIR GLORY DAYS, BUT THE PAIR TOLD JOHN BURFITT THEY STILL HAVE MORE WORK TO DO.



I became convinced that playing Davis Cup is what I really wanted to do."

Tony also remembers that day well, but admits he already had stars in his eyes long before travelling to Sydney. "As a kid, whenever I hit a ball up against a brick wall at home, I was always playing Hoad or Rosewall and giving it everything. The big players were already my opposition and it was in my mind that one day I would do it."

John leans into his mate Tony and laughs, "But you never won when you played against the wall!" And Tony quickly responds, "And I never won against the real Rosewall either!"

Today, John, 58, has dropped in on Tony, 57, at his Sydney home and the two legends are sitting, not too

times and the names Tony Roche and John Newcombe dominated the Davis Cup as members of champion Australian teams from 1965 until 1967.

While both also scored numerous victories in various Grand Slam singles matches throughout Australia, France, the USA and UK, (capped by Newcombe's triple win at Wimbledon), it is their doubles partnership that is still considered one of the greatest teams ever in tennis history. They won the Wimbledon Doubles an incredible five times between 1965 and 1974.

Their partnership has spanned almost 40 years, both on and off the tennis courts. The two men are as close friends today as they were as ambitious teenagers embarking on their first

expound on his opinions. His friend Tony, on the other hand, remains quiet and reserved, happier out of the revealing glare of the spotlight.

The great Pat Rafter, who Tony coached for almost 10 years, was quoted as saying of his former mentor: "He doesn't say much, but what he does say is worth listening to."

And Rafter should know, as he was part of the 'dream team' that Roche and Newcombe guided to Davis Cup victory, as the Coach and Captain (respectively) of the Australian Davis Cup Team from 1994 – 2000.

The one thing that Newcombe and Roche admit they have always had in common is their love of the game – and the way they play it.



John Newcombe, in particular, enjoyed a highly successful solo career in the 1970s.

"In so many ways, we were always lucky to have had each other," admits John. "We would always push each other, even in practice matches people would watch us to see how we would try to kill each other on the courts!" he laughs. "We wouldn't play best of two-out-of-three games when we could play three-out-of-fives – with maybe a few broken racquets along the way!"

"But the reason we would push each other was to make each other better. I would never have wanted Tony to be better than me and he wouldn't want me to be better than him. In that way, we would grow and improve at the game together." John goes on: "It was an unwritten code that when we went out on that court, we had to kill ourselves out there. It didn't matter whether you won or lost, as long as you gave everything you had. If you didn't, you would be silently ostracised."

Tony then adds: "Australian players have always been good like that, as they would push each other and try to kill them on the court, and then shout each other a beer when it was all over."

While the pair announced their retirement from the Davis Cup team at

the end of 2000, their workload has hardly slowed down since. Newcombe has continued with his business interests in his marketing group, an investment company, a tennis training ranch in Texas, as well as occasional commentary for the Nine Network.

On top of this, he has also just finished putting pen to paper to tell all in his much-anticipated autobiography, which will be published later this year.



and Newcombe. They are working to return Australian tennis to its former glory when the top rankings for both men and women were populated by a large number of Australians.

"I still like being involved and keep busy with the young kids coming through the ranks," says Tony. "We are always waiting for the next one who is going to take the world by storm." But it is women's tennis that John believes



"I have just finished reading the rough first draft and I've got to say I loved the process of writing it," he beams. "I actually found it quite exciting, as it follows the story of my life right up to the present day."

As for Tony, he underwent surgery in February to have a hip replacement and is currently in the process of rehabilitation. "The flexibility has not come back as yet, but I am assured it will," he says stoically. "Life has slowed down a bit in terms of travel, but apart from the hip slowing me at the moment, that's about the only change."

The pair, however, are hardly about to hang up their beloved racquets once and for all. While John admits it is the sport of golf that is keeping him active these days, he and Tony are as committed as ever to creating a bright future for Australian tennis.

Tony, in his role as the Optus Director of Tennis, is working with new players coming through the ranks to develop and coach their talents.

While Lleyton Hewitt is at the top of the world rankings and Pat Rafter is sitting at 12th, that is not enough Australian talent at the top for Roche

holds the real potential. "We have a goal to get women's tennis back to the top within five years," he says. "There are some girls in the 14-16 age group, and some around the age of 12, who are showing real talent. We want to help Tennis Australia go forward on that."

The two masters of tennis say theirs have certainly been rich lives, but there is still more work to be done and they will do it, as always, together.

"I think the secret of our friendship has been a mutual respect and understanding," says John. "You really have to set your ego aside and respect the role that the other person's playing. Because Tony and I have such different personalities, it just never seemed to be too much of a problem."

He elaborates: "For example, when we were coach and captain of the Davis Cup team, I had my responsibilities and Tony had his. We both accepted that. No one was the king and we did whatever it was that we had to do, to get the job done and get it done well."

John then smiles before adding: "No, someone was the king – the person who was playing. That person is always the king!" 🐼