

grassroots

YOUR GAME : YOUR CLUB : YOUR STATE

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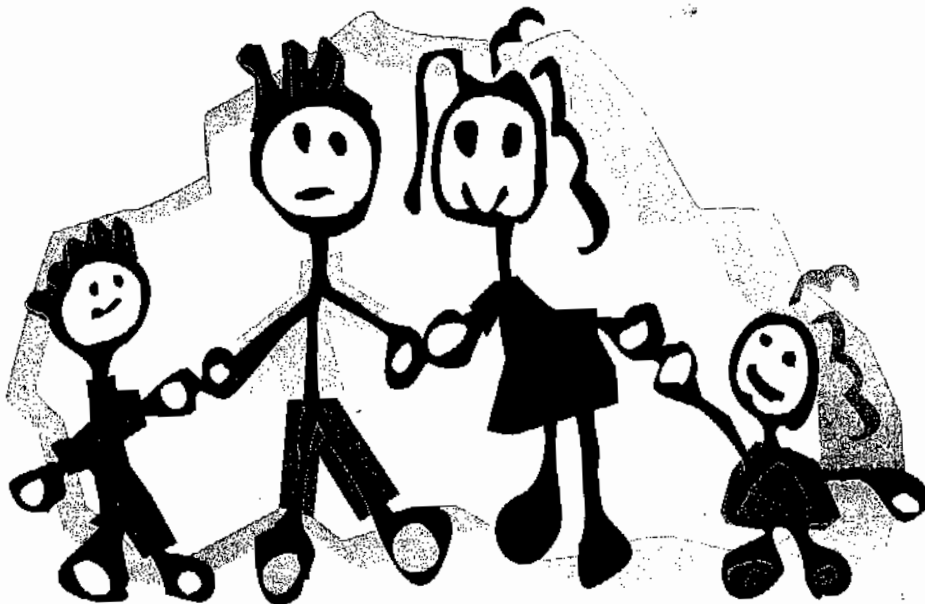
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In The Family

It's often said that the tennis industry is just one big happy family and who are we to disagree? As well as the many stories of professional sibling success, there are countless players in clubs, suburban centres and backyards whose experience of the game is enriched by sharing it with their family. By **Vivienne Christie**

Pass the salt or pass the ball? It seems there are some families who spend more time together on tennis courts than they do at dinner tables. In fact, look through the Australian tennis record books and you'll find them densely decorated with the names of famous tennis families – the Frasers, the Fancutts, the Minters, the Ellwoods and the Dominikovics are just a few.

Now there are a new wave of champions following in the famous footsteps of an older generation. Pat Cash, Paul McNamee, as well

as Anne and Liz Minter, are some of the prominent Australian names who have inspired offspring, nieces or nephews to perform their own impressive feats at junior level.

All of them started in grassroots tennis. So it's no surprise that in clubs and backyards across the country, you'll find mums, dads, siblings and other relatives on court together. Some of them will be enjoying a social hit, others will be members of the same teams. Then there are those family members who face off in high stakes competition. Often there'll be parents,

grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles sitting proudly among the sidelines supporters.

Robin O'Neill, Community Tennis Manager of Tennis Australia, says that while the sheer number of both players and organisations make it difficult to keep track of statistics, research and anecdotal evidence indicate that tennis is still very much a family game.

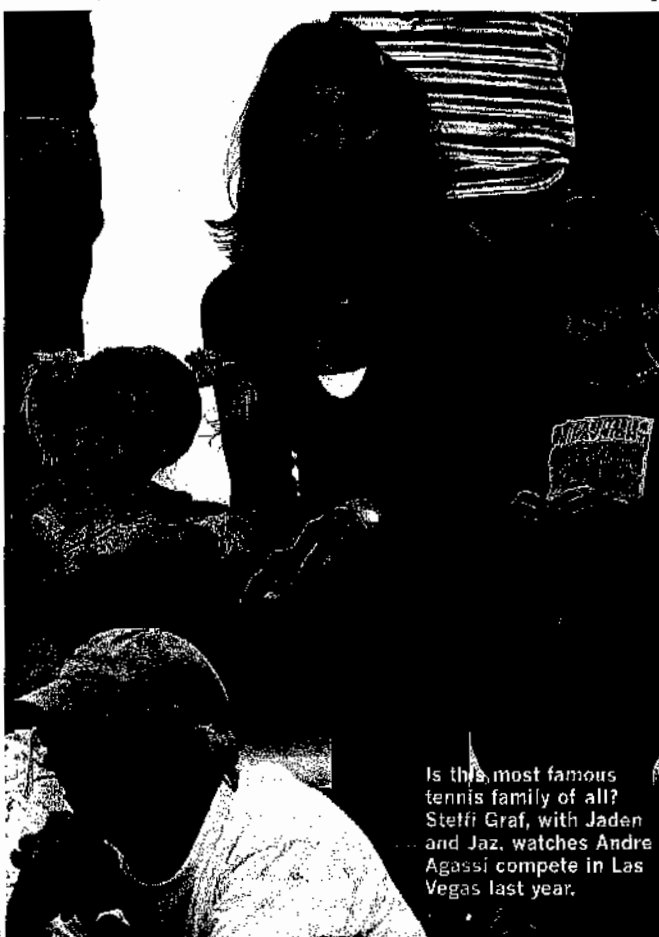
"The recent research that we've done on the tennis consumer show that family memberships are still highly valued because there's a likelihood that if there's an adult or child involved there is a strong likelihood that the whole family would want to be involved in the sport," O'Neill explains. "Socially they see value in a family membership."

As O'Neill also points out, however, having a family member in the game is by no means a prerequisite to taking up and enjoying the rich benefits of the game yourself.

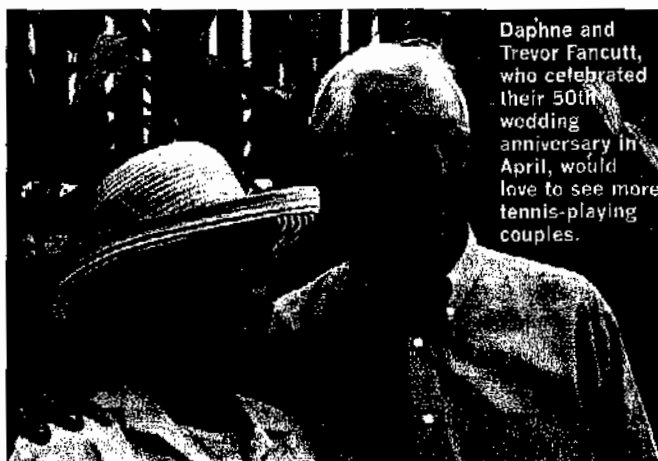
Earlier in his impressive career, Aussie legend Neale Fraser told *Australian Tennis Magazine* that parents Archibald and Gertrude had no involvement in the game. It was only after the Frasers shifted house and were invited to use the next door neighbour's court that Neale and younger brother John (aged 11 and nine-years-old at the time) discovered their passion and talent for the game. "Perhaps if the older ones had had an earlier opportunity to start the game there might have been more champions in the family," said Fraser.

The younger brothers were nevertheless supported by their older siblings (Alicia, Ian and Marcia) who spent hours practicing with the young Frasers and went on to become A-grade players in various competitions themselves.

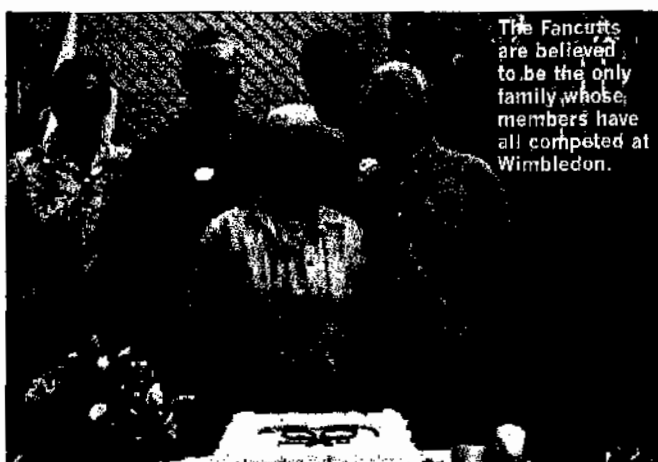
In fact, chances are that even if tennis doesn't start as a family



Is this most famous tennis family of all? Stelfi Graf, with Jaden and Jaz, watches Andre Agassi compete in Las Vegas last year.



Daphne and Trevor Fancutt, who celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in April, would love to see more tennis-playing couples.



The Fancutts are believed to be the only family whose members have all competed at Wimbledon.

sport for you, it may soon become one. The game is rich with stories of couples who meet through the game, then go on to create their own tennis dynasties.

Take the Fancutts, who are arguably Australia's most prominent tennis family. Between parents Daphne and Trevor (who recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary) and sons Michael, Charlie and Chris, the Fancutts have amassed more than 100 state and 40 national titles. If that's not impressive enough, the famed Queensland-based family is believed to be the only one in the world that has had all its members compete in the main draw of Wimbledon.

It's obvious that both talent and passion for tennis run deeply through the family bloodline – something that 70-something Daphne, who still coaches two morning a week at the Fancutts Tennis Centre in Lutwyche, is only too happy to share with others.

"We have a great love and passion for the game and have never lost it," said the grandmother of five, who estimates that she and Trevor have provided coaching to more than 60,000 pupils during the centre's 48 years of operation.

"A lot of players seem to go away from the sport and go into something else but we've always tried to put a lot back into the sport. I think that's when you get more joy out of it. The more you give back the more you really realise how many people make up the game."

The 100 plus guests who travelled to Brisbane to celebrate the Fancutts' milestone anniversary – including the legendary Ken Rosewall as well as former Wimbledon champions Ashley Cooper and Geoff Masters – would agree that the Fancutts' influence on the game has been profound. The biggest benefits

have been passed on to their three sons, who all enjoyed professional success and still have a passionate involvement in the game.

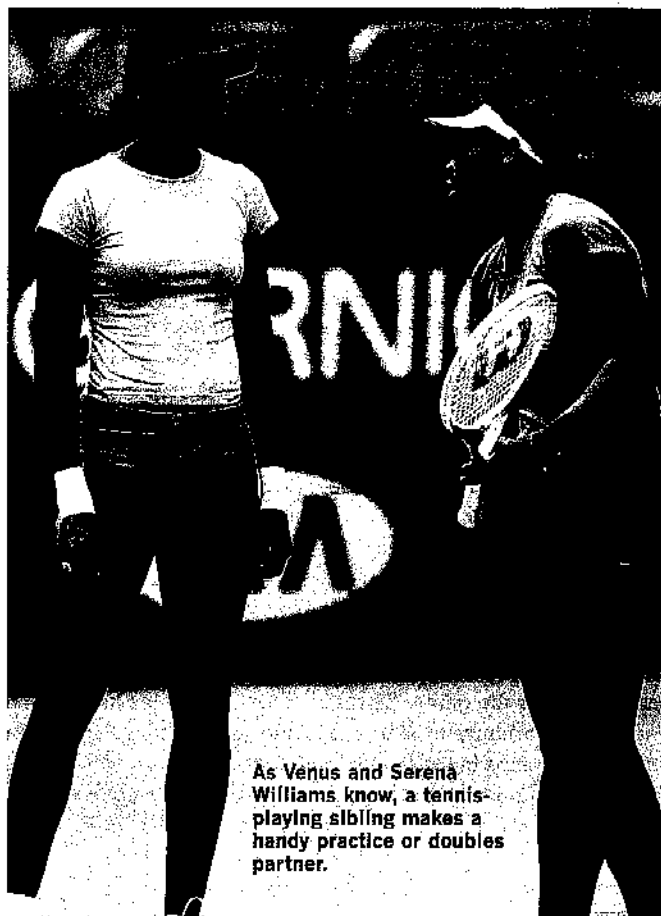
Charlie Fancutt, who upset Ivan Lendl in the first round of Wimbledon in 1981, was a founder of the Hopman Cup, which is approaching its twentieth birthday. He is now guiding prominent teenagers Michael Leong and Myles Blake, who have both competed in Grand Slam junior events (Leong, from the Solomon Islands, has also represented his country in Davis Cup). After a childhood spent largely on the courts there, Michael and Chris also remain actively involved with the Fancutt Tennis Centre.

Part of their success might be attributed to the family trait of overcoming challenges. While there was much joy in finding a tennis-loving soul-mate, there was also no shortage of obstacles after the young Daphne Seeney met South African born Trevor, when they were both en route to a Belfast tournament, at London Airport. The two young champions endured a harsh reality check after they married in Johannesburg in 1957.

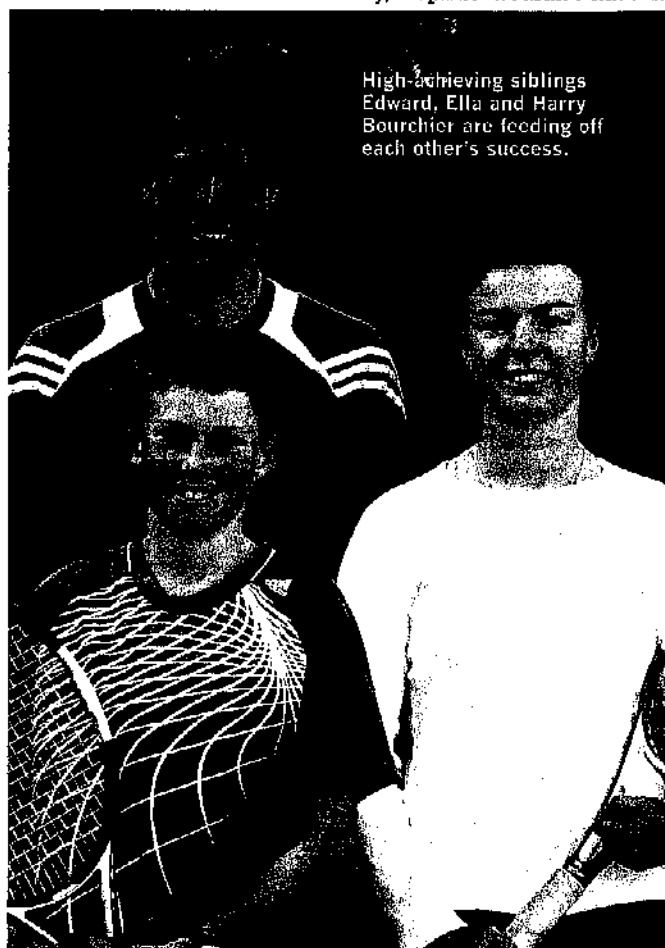
"It was lovely having Trevor of course but when we got married then the trouble started because he was in a team and there was a ban on wives," Daphne explains. "So we got married one day and he had to go to play Spain in Davis Cup the next morning at six o'clock."

"Then we played all through Europe together but the only time we were allowed to see each other is when we were on the court playing mixed doubles. We weren't allowed to stay at the same hotels, we weren't allowed to eat together. That was pretty tough for three months."

Still, with their shared experiences forming a solid foundation for such a successful tennis family, Daphne wouldn't have it



As Venus and Serena Williams know, a tennis-playing sibling makes a handy practice or doubles partner.



High-achieving siblings Edward, Ella and Harry Bouchier are feeding off each other's success.

any other way. In fact, she'd like nothing more than seeing more playing partnerships on today's tours, pointing to recent Wimbledon mixed doubles champions Jelena Jankovic and Jamie Murray (who are not officially a couple but clearly happy in each other's company) as an example of how the game can be enriched by sharing it with somebody else.

"People the world over loved the joy on those two young people's faces. That's something that's a little bit lost. We are still all humans and I think that showed the nicety of men and women playing in the same tournament ... It just shows you that the average person is still sentimental at heart. They still like to see husbands or wives or boyfriends and girlfriends. They really do like that."

In a similar way, parents love watching their children inherit their love for the game. Ian Bouchier is father to prominent Tasmania juniors Edward and Ella, who regularly feature on the honor rolls of states and national events. Later this year, 18-year-old Edward will take up a tennis scholarship at Penn State University in the United States. Ella, who is 16-years-old, has plans for similar success. Then there is younger brother Harry, who is still just 11-years-old but a talented and passionate player who can't wait to follow in his older siblings' footsteps.

Ian explains that his family were initially motivated by Sonja, their tennis-loving mother. "She was a level one developmental coach years ago, and she would teach at the same time. She loves tennis, and introduced the kids at an early age. Now I guess literally they have grown up around tennis courts," he explains.

The Bouchiers are a classic example of siblings who feed off and contribute to each other's success – but we have to wonder whether all that competitive spirit develops into sibling rivalry? "No they are all pretty good to each other," says Ian. "A few

years ago we moved to a house and built a tennis court, Harry and Edward would get up and have a hit against each other but you know they got on pretty well with each other. I think you learn to be a bit tolerant."

Anne Minter says that a successful sibling can only be a bonus when junior success develops into a professional career. After winning four WTA titles and reaching the fourth round of Wimbledon twice, Minter's career took her all the way to World No. 23. Her happiest years on tour were those she shared with younger sister Liz.

"For four or five years I travelled on my own which was hard. And then Liz turned pro and that made it a lot more fun. Having someone else was really good. You didn't have to worry about sharing rooms. You always had a practice partner and a doubles partner," she said.

Tennis was always a family game for the Minters with another sister, Jenny, also a handy player before other interests (such as writing - you might recognise her as a regular *Grassroots* contributor) also grabbed her attention. The interest was sparked by the Minters' tennis-loving mother, who would take the girls to tennis while brother Andrew was at cricket with their father.

But while there are benefits to competing alongside a sibling there are also some downsides - especially when one sibling draws another in a high-stakes match. There are few families who go to the extraordinary lengths of American twins Bob and Mike Bryan, who would take turns forfeiting every time they were drawn to play singles (any wonder they are now the world's top doubles players) but there is no doubt that competing against a brother or sister is tough.

Anne remembers drawing Liz in the first round of the US Open. "It was hard but you know you're competitive and you just took it as another match," she remembers. "We'd just warm up together but we wouldn't really talk about it. We knew each other's game so well that we sort of knew what each one was going to do."

Daphne Fancutt knows those pressures only too well after watching the obvious discomfort of Charlie and Michael, who are aged just one year apart, when they faced each other in matches. "It's not easy. I always feel for families," says Daphne, who was well-qualified to make an astute observation when she watched Venus and Serena Williams compete at Wimbledon.

"Venus didn't want Serena to be knocked out, but I really think that once she was out Venus had a real joy in going for that tournament. She didn't have that issue that she was going to play her sister. Instead of that she had a supporting sister from the sidelines and she thought 'wow, this is great, I can take this out'."

Other pressures when more than one sibling starts performing well are the logistics of getting to many different events - and the obvious one of cost. With success in the game often dependent on carefully developed skills, tennis often demands more private lessons than other sports.

But Ken Laffey, patriarch of another well-known Queensland family, believes the benefits of competing as a family can far outweigh the financial stresses. "You do hear people at times comment that it's expensive but it really isn't that expensive when you compare it with other sports," says Laffey, who runs Laff's Tennis Centre in Mt Gravatt with wife Barbara.

The Laffey's two sons Robert and Steven grew up in the family

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tennis business and were both high-achieving Queensland juniors. Laffey says there are many ways that other tennis families can find a way to manage the costs.

"While there is a shortage of tennis courts, in Brisbane in particular, a lot of children take tennis lessons in schools which is quite reasonably priced. It's generally cheaper and more convenient to take lessons there than to take them to a club," he said. "It is quite accessible to everyone."

It's perhaps the sometimes harsh realities that mean the many tales of pushy parents rarely apply to the players who have succeeded in the high-stakes world of professional tennis themselves. Legend has it that even Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf – who boast 22 Grand Slam singles titles between them – organise external lessons rather than coach (almost) six-year-old Jaden or four-year-old Jaz themselves. "They don't listen to anything we say," a philosophical Agassi was quoted as saying last year.

The success of a balanced tennis family will often begin with parents who are healthy role models both on and off the court. Bouchier explains that he and wife Sonja, who often compete in events together, are aware that a bulging trophy cabinet is not the only benefit that a family can take from the game.

"Those people who play tennis are generally a pretty good bunch of people because they are out doing something active," he explains. "You know if you are active you have less time to get up to trouble and mischief and that sort of thing."

"Tennis is (also) good in that they have to learn to manage themselves on court, their opponents and what they are coming up against."

Having succeeded at a professional level, Minter, whose children are now blossoming juniors, understands the need for parents to keep their feet firmly on the ground.

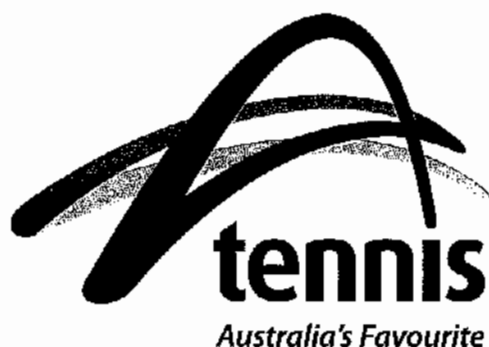
"I'm very realistic because I've been there myself and I know how hard it is. We're looking at all these juniors and maybe one or maybe none will take it through," she points out. "A lot of kids think that just by going out and working hard you'll be a tennis player but it doesn't work like that."

Daphne Fancutt agrees whole-heartedly that the game should be as much about enjoyment and community spirit as it is about winning and its lucrative earning opportunities.

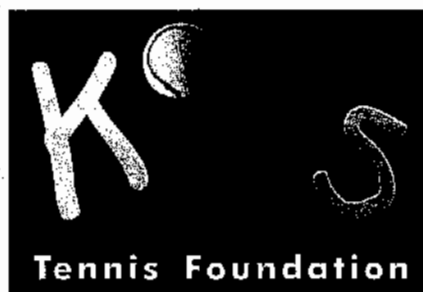
While tennis meant that her teenaged sons eventually travelled overseas to develop their talents, there was no compromising on the family's most important values in the early years. There was still a lot of tennis – but with some happy and productive years at school and a lot of home support.

"If you want your child to last in the sport let them do it gradually because there's a long life in sport," she stresses. "Half the young people around the world sense this mania about having to play six hours a day ... Every child should have a balanced life and every child should stay at school."

And as Daphne goes on to explain that her grandchildren are now showing an obvious affinity for the game she loves so much, with the youngest at less than a year old, laughing and clapping while he plays with a wooden spoon and small ball on the lounge room floor – you can't help agree with the obvious sentiment: Families are not just building tennis, but tennis is building families too. ☺



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