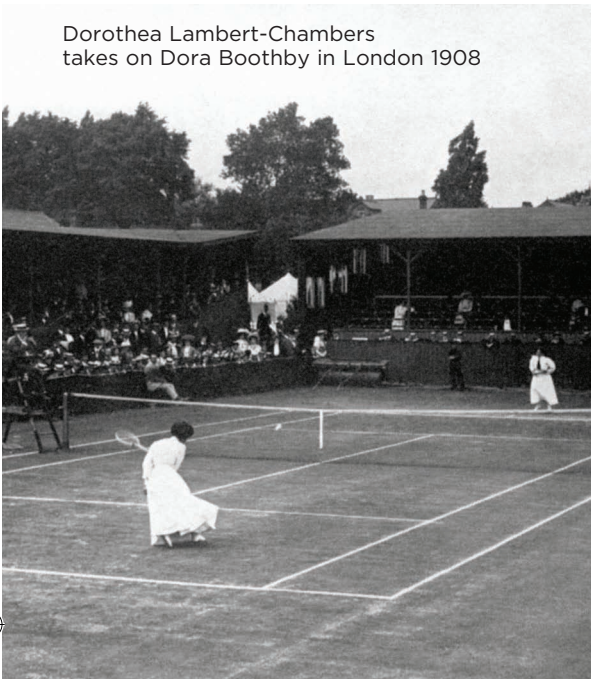


AN OLYMPIC EVENT

Intrigued and excited by the London 2012 Olympic Games, taking place on these hallowed Grounds just three weeks following The Championships? Of course you are.

By Barry Newcombe

Dorothea Lambert-Chambers takes on Dora Boothby in London 1908



Rafael Nadal celebrates winning the Men's Singles Final, Beijing 2008



Olympic tennis has not been played in this country since 1908. In that year there was an indoor tournament and a second one outdoors at Wimbledon where 31 men and only five women competed. This time, the world's best players will be hunting for the gold medals and sharing the thrill of being on the Olympic stage.

"We'll just have played the regular tournament three weeks earlier so the preparations are going to be there for us, the players," said Roger Federer. "My dream has always been to play on the biggest stage at Wimbledon one day and I got the dream when I played Pete Sampras in my first Centre Court appearance. So you can imagine what it means to me to have a chance to play at the Olympics. I hope I will be healthy and ready to go."

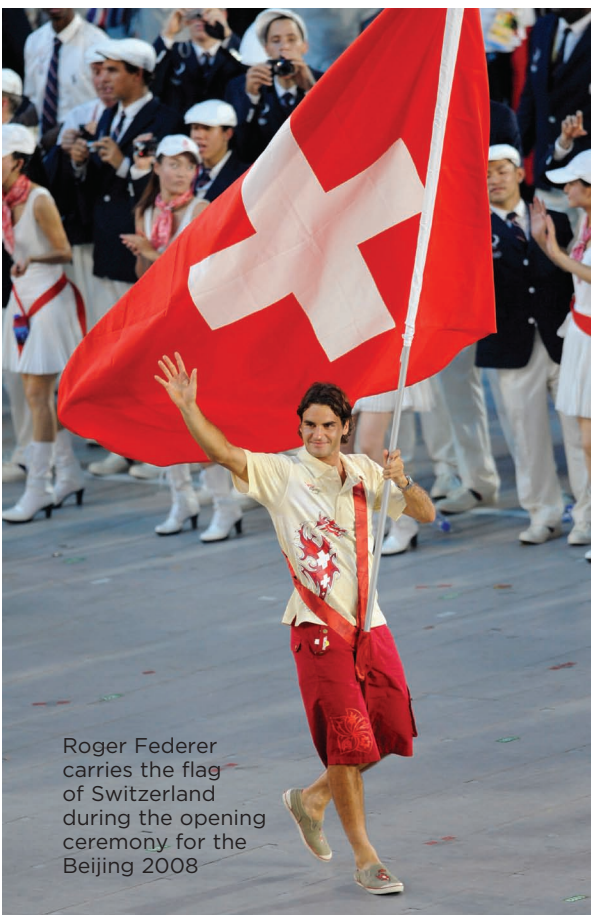
Olympic followers will remember Federer, already a world star, taking part in the opening ceremonies along with thousands of other competitors who found it hard to believe that the world's best tennis player was in their midst in Athens and then Beijing. "The Olympic Games has always been something

that has been very emotional for me," Federer explains. "In 1992 there was a Swiss Olympic champion, Marc Rosset, who was a big inspiration for me back then, I was only eleven years old. I met my wife in Sydney 2000 and I have carried the Swiss flag at Athens and Beijing, won Olympic gold in doubles, but I've never won the singles. For me, the singles is an absolute high priority of the year, my whole schedule is planned around the Olympics, and I really hope and believe I can do it, but only time will tell."

When Nadal won in Beijing in 2008, the noise was incredible – and that was just in the Spanish team headquarters in the Olympic Village. "Not in my best dreams can I have imagined this," Nadal said after beating Fernando Gonzalez of Chile for the gold medal. "I think I played almost a perfect match. And the reason that I won is because I've had a fantastic time here enjoying myself a lot in the village."

Federer, Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray will be in the Olympic field this time, three Wimbledon

Roger Federer carries the flag of Switzerland during the opening ceremony for the Beijing 2008





Serena and Venus Williams celebrate winning the Gold medal doubles match, Beijing 2008

champions and Great Britain's top player, in a collision of interest and ambition which may never be bettered. Djokovic, who earned the bronze medal at the Beijing Games, threw down a challenge to the rest of the opposition when he said: "I always set the highest goals for myself. When I was younger I was always telling myself I could be number one. Initially I was almost condemned for those words. But the faith in myself brought me to where I am now. I want to win every tournament I take part in, every Grand Slam. The Olympic Games will be held this year. I want the gold."

The women will be equally competitive as the recent Grand Slam results underline. And do not forget that the Williams sisters Venus and Serena have the target of a third gold medal in doubles.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to play in a home games," says Paul Hutchins, Britain's team leader for the Games. "We all need to focus on the ranking criteria from January to June and then be the very best prepared in the lead up to the Games. We will have a team house near to the courts and our players will be wearing Team GB-coloured clothing."



Tim Henman and Neil Broad with their silver medals, Atlanta 1996

Since tennis was re-admitted to the Olympic Games in 1988, the only medallists for Britain have been Tim Henman and Neil Broad, who won silver in the doubles in Atlanta in 1996. They had played only one match together before arriving in Atlanta but both players agreed that they created a chemistry once they were into competition at the Stone Mountain venue.

To inspire them, Broad and Henman beat the second seeds, Grant Connell and Daniel Nestor of Canada, in the second round and were on their way. In the final, planned for the best of five sets, they were beaten to the gold medal in straight sets by the legendary Australian pairing of Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde. "We always appreciated the importance of the Grand Slams but, until we won Olympic gold, we didn't understand the enormity of the achievement," said Woodforde much later. "There is a mystique you cannot explain."

The opening ceremony for the London Olympics will take place on Friday 27 July, with the first singles matches coming up the next day. The men will play best-of-three set matches with the exception of the final, which is best of five. There are five medal events – mixed doubles is included for the first time – and it is planned for play to start on twelve courts at 11.30am each day.

The men's and women's singles will have a 64-player entry list, there will be 32 teams in both doubles events and 16 teams in the mixed doubles. 🎾

What about the courts?

Once the 2012 Wimbledon Championships are complete, a carefully planned operation will move up a stage to prepare the courts and the Grounds for the Olympic tournament which will begin on 28 July. The green court surrounds will be replaced, a presentation podium will be installed on Centre Court, and throughout the complex there will be many alterations. But for Head Groundsman Eddie Seaward and his team the primary objective is to have the 12 match courts in pristine condition. "We will soak the courts, pre-germinate the seed, and wait to see what Mother Nature throws at us," he says. "We have done this operation twice before and everything we need will be on site. We will look closely at each court from the baseline to the centre line and we know we will have done everything we can in preparation terms."

