



FIRST-TIME CHAMPIONS

By Kevin Mitchell
THE GUARDIAN

When players win Wimbledon, they invariably come back for more. Only three times in the history of The Championships have first-time winners of the men's and women's singles titles danced the night away together at the most historic tournament in tennis and never reigned on these beautiful lawns again.

It is 25 years since Pat Cash clambered across the rooftops to the players' box to embrace family and friends in celebration of his win over the world No.1 Ivan Lendl, a flamboyant conclusion to an enthralling tournament for the 11th seed. The Australian dropped just one set in seven matches and beat Mats Wilander and

Jimmy Connors along the way. It was the pinnacle of a career cruelly undermined by injury. Cash would not get another opportunity to fling his trademark checkered headband triumphantly into the summer throng.

Wilander beat him in the Australian Open final the following year before Cash's

knees and back gave up on him, as well as his Achilles tendon, and he won his 12th and last title in Hong Kong, three years after the greatest afternoon of his career. He lives in London when not following the circuit as a commentator and columnist and remains one of the liveliest voices in the game, as he once was on the court.



Michael Stich (1991)



Richard Krajicek (1996)



Goran Ivanisevic (2001)

A trawl through the records shows there have been 11 different winners of the men's title in the quarter of a century since, and 10 women's winners. Is this a sign of dominance or a lack of depth? It is an argument that rages on both sides as Novak Djokovic proved himself unbeatable on all surfaces in 2011, even against Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, with Andy Murray leading a thin pack in pursuit of them, while the women's game struggles with the novelty of having four different Slam champions in 12 months and a dethroned world No.1, Caroline Wozniacki, who is yet to win a major.

It is not difficult to see Djokovic, the world No.1, adding to his growing collection of Slam trophies over the next fortnight. Whether the reigning women's champion, Petra Kvitova, does so is a more contentious debate.

The powerful left-hander is one of only five women in the Open era – alongside Ann Haydon Jones, Virginia Wade, Conchita Martinez and Jana Novotna – to have won Wimbledon and not made it to No.1 in the world. That is not to say she will not reach the top of the rankings mountain or that she will not be crowned here again this year. It would be asking a lot for her to match the spectacular success of Djokovic since her straight-sets win over Maria Sharapova in last year's final, and she faltered in Melbourne in January when in sight of the No.1 ranking. But she is only 22.

Sharapova, of course, is another who briefly lit up Centre Court and it is sobering to think that it is eight years since she won her only Wimbledon title. As she keeps telling us, though, she is still young (25 in the April just gone); such is the burden on those to whom success comes early, as Kvitova might be about to learn.

After Cash, three of the men's

champions failed to reach No.1 in the world: Michael Stich, Richard Krajicek and Goran Ivanisevic – and none of them won Wimbledon more than once.

They, of course, played in what is generally regarded as the most challenging era of the men's game: Stich's title, in 1991, came during the Becker-Edberg-Agassi period; Krajicek (1996) suffered with everyone else at the hands of Pete Sampras; as did Ivanisevic (2001) towards the end of the American's glorious time and at the dawn of Roger Federer's reign.

Boris Becker stands out as a first-time winner who, at 17, was unfazed by either the setting or the achievement. He "owned Wimbledon" from the moment he flung his lanky teenage frame across the turf to retrieve the irretrievable and defeat the American-turned-South African Kevin Curren in four sets in 1985 (the first unseeded champion, and the first German) until he won for the third time four years later.

Of the once-only winners after that, it was perhaps surprising at the time that Andre Agassi (1992) did not double up or better, given his extraordinary ability on all surfaces. The American, a defensive master, excelled wherever he played, winning a Grand Slam on hard courts, grass and clay, the first male player to do so on three different surfaces.

Lesser players made the most of what they had; Ivanisevic made the most of the weather when, ranked 125 in the world, he ignored several interruptions to beat Tim Henman over five rain-lashed sets in the semi-final in 2001. He went on to become the first wildcard to win the title, beating the Australian Pat Rafter in another five-setter.

In the women's event, only a handful of first-time winners have broken through over the past 25 years, although some

of them spectacularly. Conchita Martinez had her Pat Cash Moment in 1994, when she beat former nine-time champion Navratilova in three sets, but could not win another major.

Since the men's singles title was first contested 135 years ago, 36 champions won The Championships just once, and the list includes such excellent players as Ellsworth Vines, Bobby Riggs, Frank Sedgman, Jaroslav Drobny, Arthur Ashe, and, for the moment, Novak Djokovic. In fact, in the 10 years after World War II, there was a different champion every year.

On the women's side, there have been 21 one-time title-holders stretching back to 1890. Two of them are still playing: Sharapova and Kvitova. When the Williams sisters, Venus then Serena, arrived in the new millennium, they just about took out a mortgage on Centre Court, so irresistible were they until injury, illness and inactivity dented their aura – and into that vacuum last year stepped Kvitova, a talent yet to be fully harnessed.

Even winning just that one title here constitutes a considerable landmark in any player's career – whatever the era – and one which Andy Murray now finds himself still reaching for as the Federer-Nadal rivalry ebbs and the Djokovic era takes off, with young bucks gathering all around. There are no guarantees in sport.

Timing is everything, in sport as in life. Those players who have shaken a royal hand just once at Wimbledon will remember the golden moment fondly forever. Some, though, would have liked a bit of cream with their strawberries.

As the last remaining grass Grand Slam tournament, Wimbledon is arguably the toughest of the four to win, the toughest to predict and remains, for those reasons among others, the most prized.



Conchita Martinez (1994)



Andre Agassi (1992)



Arthur Ashe (1975)