

A History of World Badminton

It can be a good thing if origins are shrouded in mystery. It can create reasons to ponder one's identity, and occasionally to change one's view of it. It may also clarify one's direction

Did our game begin where and when its rules were written? Or elsewhere, a long time before that? Did it begin when battledore became rackets, or when there was a net across which to hit a shuttlecock? Or was the shuttlecock itself the crucial artifact in the evolution of the sport we organize today?

But maybe artifacts are not the only important things. Maybe the purpose to which they have been put is significant too. Shuttlecocks were kept up in the air more than 2,000 times by an aristocrat and a friend at Badminton House in England in the 1830's, we are told. If this was one of the game's defining moments, as the sport's name suggests, then a co-operative ingredient was contained in it.

These indoor activities, at the Duke of Beaufort's country home in Gloucestershire evolved quickly, perhaps with a piece of string which became a net, then certainly with informal codes of play, and soon afterwards with a set of rules. If it is these which are badminton-defining, then we have a slightly different view of how it emerged.

These and other overlapping mysteries may make us more aware of the character of our sport. They may offer insights into how much of its identity originates from China and other parts of the Far East, which is where shuttlecock games probably began, and how much from India, which had a major role in unifying moment, or how much from Britain, where the sport was first administered and then transformed.

These considerations were implicit in a paradigm shift of history described in the 2000 Olympic Games programme in Sydney, which pointed out that "before Badminton House there was poona, and before poona there was jeu de Volant, and before that battledore and shuttlecock and before that Ti Jian Zi.

As long as 500 BC the Chinese were playing this, sometimes referred to as Ti Jianni a shuttle-kicking game which can be played co-operatively or competitively.

It remains unclear whether this led to battledore and shuttlecock, two people hitting a shuttlecock backwards and forwards as many times as they could without allowing it to hit the ground, which seems to have begun roughly five centuries later in China, Japan, India, Siam and Greece – though it seems very possible.

How the shuttlecock originated and spread to so many different countries so long ago remains even more mysterious, though theories abound. They include suggestions that it was an inspiration caused by the feathers on arrows which make stable flight possible, or a development from quill pens stuck into cork stands, or the need to construct something which is easier to strike, initially at least, than a feather ball.

What is certain is there were many different types and sizes, with very varying weights. And what seems likely is that shuttle-kicking led to Ti Jianji, which is still played for competition and for training, and then to another game with a net which was the ancestor of badminton.

For these reasons the birth of the modern game took place in the southernmost province of China, Guangdong, according to the late Ken Brock, the IBF historian. It is there that a game Wang-Jian, was played with a net, though with different shuttles from badminton and of varying types – some with quite long feathers set in a base of sheepskins weighted with small coins!

That is a forerunner of 20th century developments in China, says Brock, in which the State Commission for Physical Culture approved Jianqui as a formal sport, publishing rules similar to badminton's except that it played three a side.

None of this would have happened without the emergence of battledores or ancient bats, which developed all over the world – in America and Europe as well as the Far East. In ancient Greece battledore and shuttlecock is at least 2000 years old. Some battledores were rectangular short handled affairs, others round or oval-headed; later vellum-covered, frame-headed ones became popular, though quite when and where they started is unknown.



A few of the battledores used in Badminton House in the nineteenth century are still kept there; they are half a meter long, have a leathery covered shaft with a circular vellum-covered head, and when the shuttle impacts it is extremely noisy.

Certainly battledore and shuttlecock was played by peasants in England in the 17th century; it also developed into a popular children's game. It became a favourite pastime of the noble and leisure classes in other European countries, becoming known as jeu de Volant.

Women, it seems, have had an affinity with badminton from its pre-history, and the game appears to have crossed class division more quickly than many others too.

Scenes of nobility or royalty, or of pretty girls holding bats and rackets and strange looking shuttles, often posing on lawns, have been painted by artists from all over Europe, Scandinavia and the Far East, while from America comes sketches of play in colonial times.

By 1860 a London toy dealer, Isaac Spratt, publishes a booklet called “ Badminton battledore – a new game”, and sold something which may have been modification of what children played at Badminton House.

The game did begin there, but in a slightly different way, according to Sir George Thomas, the IBF founder – President, who played at badminton House. It all started sometime between 1863 and 1868 on a rainy day when there was a house party, he says, but claims it was visitors rather than the children of the Duke who created it.

It was formalized, according to former All England champion S.M Massey in his 1911 coaching manual, by John Baldwin, a batter of shuttlecocks at the Duke’s house, a multi-talented sportsman, and a compiler of rules for other games. He may have done this for badminton.

More likely though is that the change from battledore to badminton happened gradually and not just in one place. It was in India here poona, a game rather closer to modern badminton developed.

Because it was fast and competitive, it became popular with British army officers stationed at the city of Pune. Its rules, arguably the first badminton rules, were written there in 1873.

So Badminton can claim to be a year or two older than lawn tennis. It did not develop as quickly as tennis but it became popular enough as an outdoor amusement for the Times of India to run a piece in which the Bishop of Madras protests against it as a threat to Christian worship both in his city and in Calcutta! But in Bombay, allegedly they were “more virtuous”!

It was played indoors at Karachi in 1870, and it was apparently there that an hour-glass shaped court developed, where two doors opened into the centre of each side of a room, creating a recess in the court.

Outdoor badminton predominated. But when imperial soldiers returned to Britain they took it with them and a more serious version developed indoors, with clubs springing up in resorts and spas of southern England, in Folkestone, Teignmouth, Bath, Southampton, Bognor Regis, and Guildford. Singles was often regarded as a selfish game and some clubs played triples and quadruples – as people did in China.

Rackets featuring strings across an oval frame were first used to play tennis like games in the 15th century. They were also used for poonas and once they were brought to England they went through rapid evolution.

An expanding market brought handcrafted, gut-stringed wooden rackets at low prices, though further major changes with metal framed rackets did not come till after world war two and the strengthening and lightning synthetic materials which enabled players to hit much harder, changing the sport, emerged only in the 1970’s and 1980’s.



But before modern badminton could emerge, it had to be standardized, something which required a governing body. This emerged in 1893 at Southseas, a coastal suburb of Portsmouth, with the inception of the Badminton Association, with Colonel S.C.C. Dolby as its President, with 14 club and uniform rules. Within five years badminton had its first open tournament, a Guildford, though still with an hour-glass court, the legacy of its Indian origins, something which survived until a General Shakespeare proposed its abolition in 1901.

By then badminton not only had a rectangular court, but a more evolved set of rules, a reasonable organization, and players who were more athletic and skilled. Within another ten years the number of clubs had increased tenfold. By 1911 there were 325.

Nine months before the 20th century opened its bloody curtain, the first All-England championship took place. It was not evident that this modest one-day event, held at the London Scottish Drill Hall, and including a lady with a coloured and elaborate hat which was said to be worth a point or two as distraction, would for a while become a peacetime idyll and the world's best known tournament. Daylight was regarded as ideal for matches so most badminton took place in the afternoons and it was only people of leisure who competed on weekday . But it quickly became so popular that purpose-built halls began to spring up. By 1908 the London Hall in North Kensington has artificial lighting, the precursor of a change which revolutionized access to the sport.

Organized badminton soon spread beyond the British Isles. By 1907 it reached South Africa, British Columbia, New York and even the Falkland islands. It was soon played in France, but it was a while before the sport caught on in the rest of Europe.

It reached a peak in Britain in the 1920's and spread to North America and Scandinavia, with Denmark and Canada making the biggest strides. The quality of play in Denmark and Canada making the biggest strides. The quality of play in Denmark rose sharply from 1930 onwards when clubs built their own halls, mostly through co-operative community effort. By 1935 Copenhagen Badminton Club had nearly a thousand members, and by the late 1930's the Danes were among the leading nations.

Being a top badminton player had become an expensive business, but amateur tradition was so strongly ingrained that it prevented most people from trying to earn money at the game. Nevertheless for a pioneering few the temptation of turning pro and becoming a full-time coach was irresistible, which was what Frank Devlin, the pioneering Irishman did in 1931.

By the mid thirties the game began to attract significant audiences in the USA, thanks partly to the clown prince of badminton Ken Davidson a Scottish international Yorkshire Cricketer and a trick-shot expert with a zany sense of humor who went to live in New York. About 3,000 came to a world professional title match.

With such great overseas development it was no longer appropriate for the Badminton Association, an English body to run the sport and so the International Badminton Federation was formed in 1934, the founder members being England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales and Denmark, Holland, France, Canada and New Zealand. How the nine multiplied into more than 160 is a story which Torsten Berg takes up in the forthcoming pages. Meanwhile we require a footnote with perspective. It might have been another year before Malaysia and India were formally involved with IBF and longer before Japan, Indonesia and China did so, but this should not lead to any assumption that pre 1934 little was happening in the Far East.

There may have been an enormous amount of talent in Asia “smoldering unseen and unsuspected” according to Brock. There seems little doubt that he was right.