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Tennis an Olympic Sport

By ROBERT COOK

On first glance, re-acceptance of tennis into the Olympic Games would seem to be a cause for rejoicing by everyone who loves tennis. Unfortunately, closer examination of the facts may dispel some of the joy.

Tennis already has been re-admitted as a demonstration sport for the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles, and as an official sport for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. But there is a strong movement developing to go ahead and upgrade the status of the sport in Los Angeles to official class. So the chances are good that Vincent Richards and Helen Moody, who won the single titles in the last official Olympic tennis competition in 1924 will be succeeded at Los Angeles.

The Olympics are not going to be a great boost for tennis, and may even end up hurting the game as we know it today.

The ideal of the Olympics, that of "amateur" athletics, is now on shaky ground and is threatened to be dropped for a lesser term of "player" athletics. The Webster's Third Dictionary defines an amateur as, "one that competes in sports or athletics for pleasure rather than for financial gain."

Some U.S. tennis insiders, who understand the situation, feel that the best U.S. Collegiates will be able to defeat the Russian and East European pros. That may be true, as American college players in '83 produced a finalist in the Seiko tournament by the name of Scott Davis, who defeated Jimmy Connors in the semi-finals and played strongly against Ivan Lendl in the finals. He retained his amateur status by not accepting the prize money he had won. U.S. colleges have produced such tennis greats as John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors; who both over time, have become number one ranked players in the World.

It must not be forgotten, however, that in the early days of Open tennis, it was the Russians and East Europeans who dominated. The Russians and East Europeans can beat our amateur players, using their own pros, as in the situation now present in Olympic Hockey. The Russians and Czechs can send their top hockey players to the Olympics, even though these same players have played against teams in the World Championships and N.H.L. players in the Air Canada Cup.

The Soviets themselves have their own "National Hockey League" as does the

Czechs. But ours is the only recognized professional league in the world. Thus, leaving our "best" at home.

Phillippe Chatrier, the president of the International Tennis Federation and chairman of the Men's International Tennis Council, the ruling body of the men's pro game, finds himself allied with the Russians and sports leaders of other Eastern European countries.

Why did the Russians and other Eastern Europeans want tennis reinstated in the Olympics? It's because, with all the West's pros disallowed from competition, the Communists foresee a propaganda feast when their "amateur" players defeat the true amateurs of the West.

Those who are looking for benefits in tennis as an Olympic sport say that the prospect of playing in the Olympics will keep the good college players from turning pro so soon. This may happen, but why is that good for tennis?

College (NCAA) tennis is a great part of today's game but to ask top players to subsidize it by continuing to play after the abilities have advanced to professional standards is neither realistic nor fair. It would be selfishly unfair of the general public to use the pressure of the

Olympics and a lot of flag waving to prevent talented college players from turning pro when they and their coaches feel they are ready.

In order for Western pros to be allowed into the Olympics, Phillippe Chatrier is now proposing something very disturbing. His recent answer to the problem is to have the great pros of the game renounce their professional labels so they can participate in the Games as "players". He even suggests that the men player's group, the Association of Tennis professionals, change its name to the Association of Tennis "Players".

Under Chatrier's plan, the players would continue to play for their usual sums of cash and endorse products, but every four years they would wink at each other, and with a sly smile, announce their intention to play in the Olympics. There is one other small detail, if the pros are to participate in the Olympics as "players", they would once again agree to come under the control of their national associations. If the pros accept this plan, not only do they lose their honesty but their independence as well.

There is the idea that the publicity of the Olympics will provide a boost for ten-

nis that any of the problems are small in comparison to the benefits involved. The historical evidence fails to support such a claim.

Eric Heiden and Gataine Boucher have become national heroes as a result of their speed-skating victories in the Winter Olympics; but has anyone built any new speed-skating ovals in your neighbourhood lately? The Olympics tend to do a great deal for individual athletes, but very little for sport.

Then there is the possibility that Olympic tennis, especially if the top pros are admitted, will end up harming the big tournament of the summer by disrupting a complex schedule, diverting players from traditional events and diminishing T.V. coverage of tournaments. If this occurs, it will be the old "cutting off your nose to spite your face" syndrome.

The Olympics are not going to be a great boost for tennis. There are significant problems if the amateurs play and even bigger ones if the pros appear under some hypocritical system. Careful, detailed, thoughtful, honest reporting by the media is needed to make sure the public is not deceived by nationalism and see the true aspects of tennis in the Olympics.