THE LAST CHAMPION

JON HENDERSON

Contents

About the Book

Wimbledon champion three times in the 1930s, Fred Perry is the finest tennis player that Britain has ever produced. Less well known is that Perry came from an unprivileged background and found himself – despite his supreme talent – an outsider in a sport that looked down on the advancement of the under-classes.

Not afraid to ruffle a few establishment feathers, Perry discarded his hallowed amateur status in 1936 and turned professional. He compounded this perceived sin by taking out US citizenship when the Second World War broke out. He embraced his new country wholeheartedly. From Hollywood to Florida, Perry led a scandalous private life, marrying four times and charming himself into the beds of numerous Hollywood starlets and beautiful models along the way.

The Last Champion is the first biography of Fred Perry. Through extensive research and revealing interviews, Jon Henderson, tennis correspondent of the *Observer*, brilliantly tells the remarkable story of this remarkable man.

About the Author

Jon Henderson, a sportswriter for more than forty years, has covered every Wimbledon since 1969 as tennis correspondent of Reuters and national newspapers, including the *Observer*. He is the author of one previous book, *Best of British*.

Also by Jon Henderson

Best of British: Hendo’s Sporting Heroes

List of Illustrations

Lindy and Lucy, with love

JON HENDERSON

THE LAST CHAMPION

THE LIFE OF Fred Perry

YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

Introduction

‘Ruthless, full of confidence, insolent’

Standing next to his opponent Jack Crawford in the lobby of the All England Club minutes before his first Wimbledon singles final, Fred Perry felt relaxed, even a little superior. He had worked out early in his tennis playing days that there was an advantage to be gained in all things, not least the matter of appearance. His dark hair was carefully combed, parted and slicked back. His clothing was impeccable. The tailored Daks trousers fitted his lean contours, but not so tightly that they prevented easy movement. His short-sleeved linen shirt was pristine. He wore a gauze strip on his right wrist to prevent sweat trickling down to his racket hand. His plimsoll shoes were of his own design: buckskin uppers with laces going right to the toe. ‘If your feet hurt, you can’t play’ was a strict Perry dictum. The man was more striking than any player on the international circuit: tall, strong-featured, shoulders wide and loose, hips narrow as a dancer’s. ‘There was never a champion in any sport who looked more like a champion than Fred Perry,’ said the great American player Jack Kramer.

With moments to go an attendant gathered up their rackets, elegant implements made from laminated wood and strung with sheep’s gut. Perry retained his own racket maker, who supplied him on behalf of Slazenger. His initials were inscribed on the slender, concave throat of each one. Before beating Crawford in the Australian final earlier that year, in January 1934, his racket had been painted white –

he heightened the effect by unveiling it only after knocking up with an old one – and the Australian crowd yelled its excitement as he walked out with his gleaming Excalibur. He had liked that and resolved to use the tactic again at this Wimbledon.

As the players were escorted through the doors to emerge into the sunlight of the south-west corner of Centre Court, a murmur rolled down from the shadows deep under the stadium's roof, from where the first sighting of the finalists was possible. The sound gathered volume before finally breaking into rousing cheers. The Wimbledon Gentlemen's Final was the high point of the summer season, as social as it was sporting, a uniquely English institution. Interlopers were allowed in, but were easily identified, the nuances of a strict dress code eluding them. Neckties with stripes and crests signalled the right club or regiment. Hats were significant too: panamas from Bond Street, or cloches styled with the distinctive cut of the finer West End milliners. The crowd was anticipating an exceptional contest between Crawford, a popular figure who had won an outstanding final the year before against the American Ellsworth Vines, and the twenty-five-year-old Englishman whose country had not produced a Wimbledon men's winner since Arthur Gore in 1909.

Perry's entrance was a command performance that had just the effect he desired. As a young Englishman of humble origins, he knew that he was perhaps the biggest interloper of all. The other top English players were from the same public-school-educated tribe that flocked to watch Wimbledon. This was another reason he felt it necessary to have an imposing presence. 'I learned quickly the importance of getting people to watch you,' he said. No one – least of all his Australian opponent – was left in any doubt that Fred Perry belonged in an arena he was starting to regard as his own.

The sense of being somewhere special had nearly overwhelmed him when he first played on Centre Court in 1930. The architects who designed the stadium a decade earlier were rewarded for their fastidiousness with an arena that remains admired and envied to this day. They put a disc of white paper the size of a thumbnail in the middle of the court and made sure it could be seen from every seat. Down the sides of the court the seating presses up to the grass's edge, and the intimacy this creates, prevented from escaping by the overhanging roof, readily communicates itself to the remotest elevated seats. As the tournament tapers to its conclusion Centre Court becomes a walled city, no longer merely the dominant building at the heart of a bustling metropolis. By the finals, everything turns in on this place as the background noises from the packed concourses of the first week give way to silence. The tension is a shared experience felt by players, officials and spectators. Great champions feed off it. Few have grown to be more satisfyingly sustained by it than Perry.

Neither Perry nor Crawford gave any hint of the pressure they must have felt as they strode across the grass scorched by two weeks of almost continuous sunshine. The gentlest of breezes stirred the air and tempered the heat, while more than twenty photographers in trilbies jostled for pictures. Perry stood erect, his poise masking the competitive rage that churned within him. According to the French player Henri Cochet, Perry was 'ruthless, full of confidence, insolent, a rough fighter'. Crawford was the more correct and elegant stroke maker. 'No one knew better than him how to deal with savage serving,' said a newspaper reporting that 1934 final, 'what control from the baseline, what a backhand, what flint for Perry's steel!'

After the high excitement, the final was an anticlimax. From the young Englishman, said the same newspaper, there would be 'no pretty-pretty work, but a swift and

painless death'. The chair umpire called 'Quiet please!' only occasionally as Perry won in straight sets to confirm his extraordinarily rapid ascent to the summit of the game. Crawford double-faulted at the finish, denying his opponent an explosive coup de grâce. He bowed towards the line judge who had disallowed his anxious first serve for a foot fault.

Before the match Perry had already carefully choreographed in his mind how he would respond if he won. He did a cartwheel and then vaulted the net, a display designed to give the impression that the match had taken little out of him. Crawford was barely halfway to the net before Perry reached him. Britain's first Wimbledon men's champion for a quarter of a century patted the Australian on the shoulder and put a consoling arm around his neck. The ramifications of the result were immense. A young man who only five years before had been unknown outside the limited sphere of table tennis – a poor-boys' sport at which he had become world champion – was now an international figure. By his example Fred Perry had, in theory, placed tennis within reach of anyone who wished to play it.

* * *

The new champion's roots were solidly working class. The early years of his childhood had been spent in semi-detached and terraced houses in the north-west of England. His father had begun his working life as a cotton spinner but rose to be a Labour MP, and in Sam Perry's drive for political advancement can be discerned the absolute single-mindedness that would make his son an irresistible force in tennis.

Fred Perry's thrust and ambition in an overwhelmingly amateur sport were not universally admired and were part of the reason why many on that day he won Wimbledon for the first time preferred to support Crawford. Reporting on the final in the *Manchester Guardian*, E.J. Sampson noted,

‘The crowd in their shout for Perry had a sob in the throat for Crawford.’ John R. Tunis, of *Esquire*, said that there was resentment that ‘a poor boy without a varsity education should have yanked himself up to the front’.

Perry’s background informed much of how he behaved as a tennis player, just as it often determined the way people reacted to him. After that 1934 final he experienced an example of the sort of prejudice that affected him deeply. Within minutes of beating Crawford, he was reminded that the son of a Labour MP had to do more than win Wimbledon to be accepted by the panjandrums of the All England Club, even if his account of what happened in the locker room, told fifty years later in his autobiography, was almost certainly closer to the truth in essence than detail. Soaking in a post-match bath in the locker room, he said he overheard the plummy tones of a committee man suggesting to Crawford that the laurels had gone to the wrong player. Crawford was handed a bottle of champagne, while the honorary All England Club member’s tie that was Perry’s due was left for him, draped over the back of a chair. ‘All my paranoia about the old-school-tie brigade surfaced with a vengeance,’ he said.

By 1934, Perry had already made a number of visits to the United States and was forming a strong affinity with that country and its citizens. His first visit in 1930 had immediately established a bond, even if the pace of New York initially overwhelmed him. He loved the access to everything that he found in America, so different from Britain, where far too many glittering events had invisible NO ENTRY signs swinging from cut-glass doorknobs. In 1931 he travelled to the West Coast and was further seduced by the American way of life. Here he encountered more evidence of the spirit of inclusiveness that distinguished the New World from the snobbery and class divisions of England, and in the late 1930s he took US citizenship.

Not only did he feel more at ease with American society, he was, we can now recognise, perhaps the closest tennis came to producing a player in harmony with the jazz years. Much of the way he played – while endlessly practised and clinically executed – was of his own devising, based on his first, and largely untutored, sporting incarnation as a table tennis player. Bill Tilden, an American still regarded by many as the greatest ever tennis player, remarked that Perry was either the worst best player or the best worst, who 'hits every shot wrong – every single one'. Had Perry played an instrument, he would have loved the improvisation of jazz musicians. His sporting and social lives were played to the rhythms of someone who relished doing things differently. They were underpinned by discipline but distinguished by originality. His famous running forehand – with the ball taken impossibly early – was the product of a conflation of these controlled, yet innovative, sides.

His private life, which became increasingly less private as he worked his way through three marriages before finding happiness in a fourth, was a paradoxical mix of the austere and carefree. The same man who advocated the spartan benefits of going early to bed and abstinence partied hard with the likes of Errol Flynn and David Niven and, at the very least, traded one-liners with Bette Davis and Marlene Dietrich.

The speed with which Perry reached the pinnacle of tennis was remarkable, even at a time when the number of players competing seriously was a fraction of today's figure. Rarely can aptitude and commitment have been combined in such measure in one person. He had soared through the table tennis rankings to take the world title in Budapest in 1929. 'I was world champion at twenty,' he said, 'so decided to retire while I was still at the top.' Within four years Perry had helped Britain regain the Davis Cup, which largely through his contributions they then

monopolised until 1936, and from 1934 to 1936 he took command of the Wimbledon men's singles. George Lott, an old American adversary, reviewing Perry's career, wrote, 'Here was a man who not only possessed but also exhibited the qualities so necessary in a champion, namely, confidence, concentration, condition, coordination, courage and fortitude, determination, stamina, quickness and speed.'

Still the list is incomplete. Perry was more competitive – often archly so – than any player before him, and possibly since. It was something that not every rival appreciated. Nearly all forgave him, although some waited until their reminiscing years when resentment no longer seemed worthwhile. Later Perry owned up to 'surreptitious gamesmanship'.

One other notable aspect of Perry's story is the way, despite a parochial upbringing, he embraced travel. Throughout his life he seemed uninhibited by the notion of boundaries, either in terms of what he could achieve or where he might go. The world was opening up to sportsmen and tennis gave Perry the chance to roam, which he grasped during and after his playing career with extraordinary enthusiasm. On his travels he became the first player to win the game's four major singles titles: Wimbledon and the championships of Australia, France and the US, known as the grand slams. In later life he took assignments in such diverse locations as Egypt, Jamaica and the Soviet Union. He was, arguably, the first truly global sporting figure.

The three consecutive Wimbledon titles that Fred Perry won between 1934 and 1936 stood above all his many other successes. Some part of nearly every day of a full and colourful life that was to last another fifty-nine years referred back to the twenty-one straight wins during those summers, when the world – weary from one fight and fearful of another – looked to sportsmen such as Perry,

Jesse Owens, Donald Bradman and Babe Ruth for vicarious enjoyment and distraction. Through his trilogy of monumental victories at Wimbledon he helped define an age that pointed towards a more meritocratic future. He also foreshadowed another age – more than half a century away – in which the manufacturing and marketing of celebrity were to become a huge international industry generating fortunes and idolatry on a scale that in the 1930s would have seemed incredible. His life and worldwide fashion brand resonate today with sports stars and public alike. Few British sportsmen have come close to emulating his glory and achievements. A century after his birth, Fred Perry remains the last champion.

1

A father’s boy

‘We come of common stock’

SPENDING TIME IN the beautifully kept gardens of Vernon Park must have been one of the few small pleasures to be found in that working-class area of Stockport in which Sam and Hannah Perry lived at the start of the twentieth century. The park with its grand oaks, beeches and chestnuts, neat pathways, sloping lawns and colourful flower beds was an unlikely reward for walking half the length of Carrington Road, a determinedly unprepossessing thoroughfare in the east of the town. It is possible to imagine Hannah, whose workaholic husband Sam was rarely at home, with her daughter Edith and baby son Fred moving slowly through the park in the warm glow of a summer’s afternoon. Fred may even have taken his first, tottering steps there.

The family were spared the menacing background music that now travels the short distance from the M60, a motorway whose use by an unending stream of HGVs is a reminder of this part of north-west England’s robust survival as a significant centre of industry. The other end of Carrington Road from Vernon Park joins the gyratory at junction 27 of the motorway. From there, number 98 is an end-of-terrace house halfway down on the right-hand side. This is where, according to Fred Perry’s 1984 autobiography, he first saw the light of day. A little further down and on the left is number 33, a semi-detached house but smaller than 98. High up to the left of the front door of

33 is a plaque, put there by the Metropolitan Borough of Stockport, which says 'FRED PERRY 1909–1995 Tennis player Frederick John Perry was born here …' and goes on to list his sporting accomplishments plus the fact that he was made a freeman of the borough in 1934.

The Fred Perry file in Stockport's heritage library fails to clear up the mystery of where exactly he made his entrance into the world. There is a picture of number 98 taken in the 1930s with the caption that this is where Perry was born; the next page is a copy of his birth certificate giving 33 as his birthplace. One explanation is that, by the time of Perry's birth, his father, Sam, who was then thirty-one and had already achieved an extraordinary amount for someone with a background unsullied by privilege, had bought a second house in Carrington Road. The address logged on the birth certificate may not have been the one where the family lived.

Sam Perry had spent all his early life in Stockport, which is six miles south-east of Manchester. He was born there on 29 June 1877, the son of Samuel, a cotton worker, and Annie Perry, and was steeped in the sights and sounds of its industries. Cotton manufacture, which in the age of steam and ingenuity had given rise to the great brick edifices that housed the inexhaustible, chattering inventions of men such as Sir Richard Arkwright and Samuel Crompton, was chief among them, providing jobs for nearly 10,000 people in the town. Young Sam delighted his parents by winning a scholarship to the 500-year-old grammar school for what was to prove a brief stay.

The pursuit of academic excellence through full-time schooling was an extravagance that had to be dispensed with when Samuel died. Like many other children of hard-pressed families, Sam followed his father into the cotton industry to earn money in the local mill as a half-timer. This was the system, common in the labour-intensive cotton

industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that sanctioned part-time factory work by children if they were also given time to do school work.

‘I was raised in a hard school,’ Sam Perry said. ‘I was a half-timer at the age of ten in a Cheshire cotton mill and struggle and poverty combined gave me little opportunity in my early years. It had been one of my experiences to beg pennies from door to door in order to pay the rent of a football field.’ His wage of one shilling a week was a valuable contribution to the family budget. Of greater value, though, in terms of his later life, was what he earned in experience and extracted from the other opportunities available to someone of his enterprise.

In the workplace, he studied machine drawing and construction, mathematics and mechanics, showing great flair for all these subjects. Also, he quickly grasped how the human side of factory life functioned. This led to his involvement in trade unionism at an unusually young age. He was undaunted by the fact that the complexities of the cotton industry’s pay and job structures were such that he had to pass a number of exams in competition with others in order to qualify as a union official. His own first job was simply as a cotton spinner. When he moved on to the self-acting mule, the spinning machine that Richard Roberts developed from Crompton’s original invention, he took on the slightly grander title of self-actor minder. His fellow worker Hannah Birch, who seemed unabashed at having caught his eye, was a winder, someone who transferred cotton from bobbins to prepare it for weaving.

Sam Perry excelled in his exams, passing with first-class honours, which immediately brought him to the attention of his union elders. In 1898, at the age of twenty-one, he was elected president of the Stockport Operative Cotton Spinners’ Association and went on to take up the reins of the Stockport Trades Council and later the Stockport Labour Representation Committee. In his late twenties, he

was made Stockport's youngest justice of the peace, a rare honour in those days for anyone with a Labour affiliation, let alone of his young age. 'Wherever Sam Perry went he seemed to claim the confidence and arouse the enthusiasm of working-class folk,' a colleague said.

Hardly surprisingly, given his interest in trade unionism, Perry was also attracted to another cause supported by the working classes at the time, the co-operative movement, which pursued the idea of industries and commercial concerns being owned and controlled by workers for their joint economic benefit. The movement had originated in northern England and Scotland in the late eighteenth century, but the first really successful co-operative enterprise was started in Rochdale, not far from Stockport, in 1844. Perry, an intuitive cooperator, would have been familiar with this history and in 1908 he helped to save the Stockport Co-operative Society when its future was threatened by a financial crisis. At a midnight meeting called to sort out the mess, he put himself forward for the post of president and was unanimously elected. It was his first key role in the co-operative movement, which would become central to his life's work.

Like many others from his background and with his zeal, Perry had one other notable affiliation. He was a staunch supporter of the Methodist Church, with its strong traditions of concern with social welfare and promoting sobriety. He preached regularly and supported the Manchester temperance movement. This commitment to abstinence stayed with him throughout his life. He offered Fred, as a young boy, financial incentives not to smoke or drink before he was twenty-one. Fred failed to collect on the former, signing up to the popular pipe-smoking habit, but pocketed the reward for not drinking, for which he gave credit to an uncle who liked the booze and had once hung him upside down from a clothes line. Not long after, the uncle died of drink.

Beyond the dimly lit world of cotton factories, committee rooms and the pulpit, Sam Perry was a keen sportsman. He liked cross-country running, football, bowls and golf, and, in his own words, met with a fair measure of success in competitions, remaining fit throughout his life. A colleague who saw him regularly in later years at the co-operative movement's stolidly imposing building in Manchester said, 'He kept his sportsman's complexion and brisk step up Holyoake House staircases year by year with no apparent failings. When last I saw him he looked twenty years younger than his age.' He also enjoyed music and amateur dramatics. When he retired in June 1942, after nearly a quarter of a century as secretary of the Co-operative Party, one speaker at the party given in his honour said, 'He has always taken a lively interest in the brighter things in life. At Stockport he was actively connected with the repertory movement and at summer schools his musical accomplishments in the plebeian art of cornet playing always afforded listeners a great deal of pleasure.'

Sam Perry married Hannah Birch, who was also twenty-four, in a Church of England ceremony at St Matthew's, Stockport on Boxing Day 1901. Their first child, Edith, was born two years later, and Fred arrived six years after that, on 18 May 1909, the midwife being summoned either to 33 or 98 Carrington Road.

Family life was conducted according to strict Victorian principles with Sam the lord and master. He seldom if ever alluded to the women of the household and no one was in any doubt about what was and was not acceptable behaviour. 'As far as the family was concerned he laid down the rules and you had to adhere to them otherwise you were in trouble,' Fred said. 'But it was a very family-orientated atmosphere. A happy atmosphere, and it was fun.' As young children, Edith and Fred grew used at mealtimes to conversation that was invariably far harder to

digest than their food. Their father's thoughts on cooperation as a political idea dominated table talk.

In his working life, Sam Perry rapidly established himself as a serious player in the co-operative movement, which meant a series of promotions and house moves. Fred remembered he was only two or three years old when they left Carrington Road, still long enough for him to be regularly referred to for the rest of his life as a Cheshire lad. Stockport showed its enduring allegiance to him when in May 1935, in front of a large crowd at the town hall, the mayor presented him with a silver tea and coffee set made by a local jeweller. (In 1997, the town bought it back for £3,600 at an auction in London, together with Perry's 1933 Davis Cup medal, for which it paid £4,200.)

The Perrys spent an equally short time in Bolton and had a brief spell back in old Cheshire, living in Wallasey, during which time Sam was asked to become a full-time organiser at the co-operative headquarters in Manchester.

Fred Perry's first vivid memories were of the time in Wallasey, although he discovered many years later that some things were not quite as he pictured them. The family lived in Vicarage Grove in the Liscard district for two years in the First World War and Fred attended the junior school of Wallasey Grammar in Wither's Lane. He told of revisiting the house from which his father commuted to an office in Liverpool's Liver Building and later to Manchester, a much longer journey. He was surprised to find that what he remembered as a large dwelling with substantial gardens back and front turned out to be a good deal pokier than he recalled with only a few feet of land either side. The long walk to the sweet shop was no more than a few steps around the corner. The lady who answered his knock let him in, and when she closed the door he saw a plaque, FRED PERRY LIVED HERE. He never tired of expressing his bafflement at the furtive way his residence there was proclaimed.

His strongest bond with an older member of the family was with his mother's father, Grandad Birch. The two enjoyed playing board games, particularly draughts, and Fred remembered being chided, good-humouredly, as a cheat. He was banished from the house when Grandad Birch died so that he could not overhear the funeral arrangements being made.

In the last year of the war, he and his classmates from the junior school were given the day off to welcome the Mersey ferry boats *Royal Iris* and *Royal Daffodil* when they returned from the Zeebrugge Raid, the action in April 1918 at which the British tried to stop the Belgian harbour being used by German submarines. Perry and his chums were given Union flags and from the banks of the Mersey cheered the homecoming local sailors, who had performed heroically if not altogether successfully in their mission.

By 1918 Sam Perry was a key figure in the debate on parliamentary representation for the co-operative movement. The main argument was between those who supported independent representation and those who favoured an alliance with the Labour Party. Victory for those advocating direct parliamentary representation led to the formation of the Central Co-operative Parliamentary Representation Committee, which eventually changed its name to the Co-operative Party, with headquarters to be established in London. Perry became the party's first secretary. It was a time for optimism as the guns that for four years had thundered over the Western Front at last fell silent, and now the Perrys' own future was heavy with hopeful possibilities. Any trepidation they felt must have been offset by a sense of excitement as they prepared to go south to start their new life in the capital.

By the summer of 1919 they had settled in to Pitshanger Lane in Brentham, a part of Ealing in west London. The location was not particularly convenient for 19 Buckingham Street, close to Charing Cross station in central London,

where Sam Perry and a small staff opened the party's new offices. Brentham's attraction was partly its pleasantness – Fred described it as 'a paradise after the bleak streets of the North' – and, what really counted as far as Sam Perry was concerned, its roots in the co-operative movement.

After a meeting in 1901 at the Haven Arms in Ealing, attended mostly by workers with the dream of building houses for themselves, Brentham moved quickly from idea to reality. One of the Brentham pioneers was a bricklayer named Harry Perry, no relation but a nice coincidence, particularly as Harry also had politics in his genes with a father who was a prominent member of the Liberal Party. Harry Perry was Brentham's first works manager, overseeing the building of 600 houses up to the outbreak of war in 1914. In fifteen years, the open fields that had been Pitshanger Farm were transformed into London's first garden suburb, providing a model for others, most notably the one at Hampstead.

The Perrys remained at 223 Pitshanger Lane, built in 1906, until soon after Sam Perry's death in 1954, when the house became known as Pooh Corner, the excuse being that it stands on the corner of Brunner Road. That name has now been dropped and there is a notice on a post in the front garden telling passers-by that they are in Brentham Garden Suburb with a quote from the current Prince of Wales describing Brentham as 'a small, yet inspiring, piece of English town planning'.

The 'paradise' of Brentham was where Fred Perry's sporting ambitions began. He blossomed almost as soon as the family moved in. A neighbour who lived opposite remembered he would leave at exactly the same time each morning for school, the first of four daily walks – he came home for lunch – of more than a mile each up and over the steepish hill behind his house. He would invariably set off whistling and often walk down the middle of the road.

It did not matter that Fred – 'Titch' to his friends – was small for his age; he played every sport that the many open spaces in the area allowed him to, football and cricket being his earliest favourites. He was forever knocking on doors pressing friends to kick a ball with him. The first known photograph of Perry participating in an outdoor activity was taken at the annual maypole ceremony in 1924, at the Brentham recreation ground. His demeanour suggests it was not quite energetic enough for him. He looks decidedly forlorn as he stands with the other children, wearing a white overall and holding a rope attached to the pole. A programme of May Day Festivities lists him as one of sixteen members of the Double Plaiting and Spiders' Web team.

His parents' determination that he and Edith should join in Brentham life as much as possible meant Fred acquired social skills that would serve him well once he joined the celebrity set. At the newly built Brentham Institute, just around the corner from Pitshanger Lane, he learned to dance. Margot Reading, who, with her brother Charles, was one of Fred's earliest tennis partners, taught him the waltz and foxtrot. Sport had just started to consume him. The *Brenthamite* magazine recorded what was possibly Fred Perry's maiden sporting triumph, victory in a three-legged race over eighty yards in August 1923. Charles Reading, who provided one and a half of the legs, was not to know that he was, in all probability, achieving a sort of immortality as the first person to partner Fred Perry to victory in an event on a grass surface. They must have been a handsome pair. Reading went on to make a name for himself as an actor of striking good looks and then at the London Palladium as the production manager who staged lavish shows starring legends of light entertainment such as Judy Garland and Danny Kaye.

The institute was where lawn tennis came into Perry's life. 'It was there that I first became interested in watching

and playing sport,' he said. The decision to instal excellent sporting facilities at the institute seems almost providential given their role in Fred Perry's development.

Sam Perry's own love of sport meant he went out of his way to encourage his son's fervour for playing games. At the same time he was just as keen on instructing both his children on their general conduct and would lecture them like some latter-day Polonius, passing on 'these few precepts for thy memory'. It was important they were as good as their word and engaged with people. Perry senior could not abide stand-offishness. Edith and Fred were told to greet everyone as if he or she meant something to them, to hold out a hand and say, 'How do you do, pleased to meet you.' It was advice whose value Fred understood instinctively and carried with him into all areas of his adult life.

Sam Perry has been hailed as 'the man who made the Co-operative Party', quite an epitaph considering the lack of advantages of his early years. His dedication to the movement was based on his belief that co-operative principles were as relevant to Labour politics as trade unionism. He felt Labour invested too much faith in unionism, that by using it as the sole weapon in their battle against the right in British politics they were flexing only half their power. 'The co-operative movement supplied the other half,' he said, 'by trying to bring into industry a more Christian-like spirit.'

He was no firebrand, rather a person who preferred measured argument to high-flown oratory, by inclination a creature of the committee room rather than the debating chamber. 'He nearly always succeeded in applying the art of persuasion where forceful demands would have brought certain failure and resistance,' a colleague said. Some felt he suppressed a more flamboyant side to his character because he thought that co-operative politics needed to be

‘respected and respectable’. ‘He was not interested in stunts and short cuts,’ an obituarist wrote, ‘but he was interested in building up a specifically Co-operative group within the Labour forces.’ Fred Perry’s take on his father was that he did nothing to alter his image for political expediency, describing him as ‘an excellent speaker, though a quietly spoken person’. It could be argued – and some people have – that Sam Perry’s low-key performances did not give the party the projection it needed or make him as authoritative a figure as he might have been.

The Co-operative Party’s first real foray into mainstream politics was at the 1918 general election, when the air rang with promises of a new and better country for the returning heroes of the Great War. The result was disappointing, with the railway worker Alfred Waterson, who stood in Kettering, the only one of ten Labour/Co-operative candidates to win a seat in Parliament. At the Co-operative Party congress in Carlisle in 1919, Perry, whose earlier stance in favour of independent representation went against his gut feeling for a closer alliance with the Labour Party, tabled an important motion that was passed but later ignored. It called for ‘The National Co-operative Representation Committee to negotiate with the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress Parliamentary Committee with a view to a federation for electoral purposes, and with the ultimate object of forming a United Democratic or People’s Party.’

In 1920, Hannah Perry and the children were introduced to the strains and deprivations brought on by having a member of the family, in those days almost certainly a husband and father, involved in front-line national politics. This was the year Sam Perry stood for Parliament for the first time when he contested a by-election in what was now (to the Perry family) the remote constituency of Stockport.

The build-up to the by-election was dominated by the participation of the jailed Irish Workers’ Republican

candidate William O'Brien. The publicity did O'Brien no good, his 2,336 votes leaving him last out of seven. Perry's trenchant support for Irish independence may have cancelled out the advantage of still being well known in Stockport and the co-operative movement's popularity in the area. A Labour/Co-operative candidate, Perry finished fourth in the fight for the two seats behind a Coalition Conservative and a Coalition Liberal, who were first and second, and Sir Leo Chiozza Money, the former Liberal MP, now a Labour candidate. Money was an Italian immigrant whose choice of anglicised surname seemed bizarre, particularly as it may have lost him a vote or two when he was in fact a fierce upholder of the redistribution of wealth. Perry's 14,434 votes gave him 16.2 per cent support but were more than 8,000 fewer than the winner.

In the face of criticism that by cosying up to Labour, then in a period of decline, the party had damaged its chance in the by-election, Perry gave one of his most compelling performances at the 1921 party congress in Scarborough. In unadorned language he attacked those who were against moving closer to Labour – or even venturing into politics at all: 'Only by active co-operation with our friends in the trade union and Labour movement can we achieve the objects we have set out to obtain … we come of common stock. We are working for the common end, and only by marching together with the trade union and Labour movements can we establish the co-operative commonwealth, which is the ideal of every true cooperator.'

More long absences from the bright new family home in Pitshanger Lane were inevitable when he stood in all three general elections that took place between 1922 and 1924. Labour's recovery to compete alongside the Conservatives and Liberals caused this eruption of political activity, which tested almost to destruction a mechanism geared to a two-party system. The first of these three elections, which, according to one commentator, represented 'a state of

confusion unknown in any former election', brought the downfall of David Lloyd George and the humbling of the Liberal Party. Sam Perry, standing again in Stockport, campaigned on a platform of international cooperation, world peace, the abolition of taxes on food and a fairer system of taxation. This time he came third, although four out of eleven Co-operative Party candidates did win their seats. Perry's solidly fought campaign at least gained him 17,059 votes, a record for the party.

The major disappointment for the Co-operative Party of the 1922 election was Waterson's loss in Kettering by 128 votes. Kettering was a complicated constituency with its mix of industrial labour force and rural squirearchy. Hard-core manufacturing, mainly of footwear, and fox-hunting coexisted within two or three miles of one another. Traditionally, the town of Kettering, along with other industrial centres in Northamptonshire, voted Liberal, a practice that Labour had found hard to break. Perry knew that co-operative principles were embedded deep in the working community's psyche and felt that, with the Liberals losing ground because of their reluctance to pursue left-wing policies, he could win back the seat, if given the opportunity to stand as a Labour/Co-operative candidate.

His chance to do so came in December 1923, barely a year after he had lost for the second time in Stockport, when he faced an adoption meeting at Kettering Public Hall Baths. He was given a hard time as he tried to allay the fears of moderates concerned he might be too far to the left and overly austere. He reacted by distancing himself from communism and the Russian regime, and said he would vote against prohibition, although he was an abstainer. He even mentioned his sporting achievements, especially on the golf course. Arguably, the Perry sporting legend started here. Not many candidates at the 1923 general election can have introduced a sporting theme into their campaigns. It