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Tennis has a history spanning many cultures over thousands of years, with games of balls and rackets being played in various cultures from **Neolithic times**. There is evidence that ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians played some version of tennis, and ruins from Mesoamerica indicate a particularly important place for ball games in their cultures. But court tennis—also called "real tennis" and "royal tennis" in Great Britain and Australia—owes its start to a game played by French monks as early as the 11th century.

The Beginnings of Modern Tennis

The French game was called *paume* (meaning "palm"); it was a court game in which the ball was struck with the hand. *Paume* evolved into *jeu de paume* and rackets were used. By the time the game spread to England—Henry VII and Henry VIII were big fans—there were as many as 1,800 indoor courts. The Pope tried unsuccessfully to ban it. Wood and gut rackets were developed by 1500, along with balls of cork and leather.

But tennis in the days of Henry VIII still was a very different sport from today's version. Played exclusively indoors, it was a game of hitting a ball into a netted opening in the roof of the long, narrow tennis house. The net was five feet high on the ends and three feet high in the center.

Outdoor Tennis

Although the game's popularity had dipped by the 1700s, it took a major step forward in 1850 when **vulcanized rubber** was invented. A hard rubber ball, applied to tennis, allowed for an outdoor game played on grass. A Londoner, Major Walter Wingfield, invented a game called *Sphairistikè* (Greek for "playing ball") in 1873, from which modern tennis evolved. Wingfield's game was played on an hourglass-shaped court and

created a sensation in Europe, the United States, and even China.

When adopted by croquet clubs—which, after all, had acres of manicured lawns—the hourglass shape gave way to a longer, rectangular court. So it was that in 1877, the former All England Croquet Club held its first tennis tournament at Wimbledon. The rules of this tournament set the template for tennis as it is played today.

Almost, that is: [Women couldn't play in the tournament](#) until 1884. Players also were expected to wear hats and ties, and service was exclusively underhand.

Tennis Scoring

No one is sure where tennis scoring—love, 15, 30, 40, deuce, etc.—came from, but most sources agree it originated in France. One theory is that the scoring was invented to match the face of a clock with the score given in quarter-hours: 15, 30, 45 (abbreviated to 40). It wasn't necessary to use 60 because it meant the game was over anyway—unless the game was tied, or at "deuce." That term, the theory goes, came from the French *deux*, or "two," indicating that from there, two points were required to win. "Love," this version goes, came from the French *l'oeuf*, or "egg," a symbol for "nothing," like a goose egg.

Another theory is that instead of a clock, the 60-point system is based on 60, a number considered "good" in medieval numerology, and it was divided into four segments, as in the previous theory.