

Our Sporting Heritage

by Lisa Ng



The Melbourne University Sports Union was the predecessor to the current Melbourne University Sports Association. Since its inception, the aim of the Union and now the Association is to provide a collective voice for all affiliated sporting clubs on the University campus. This year the Melbourne University Sports Association is celebrating its centenary.

Sport plays a valuable role in the daily lives of many people in the University community. Sporting opportunities have helped develop the leadership and 'Team Melbourne' spirit of past and current students. While 1904–1905 is lauded as the beginning of centrally coordinated sporting activities, with the inception of the Melbourne University Sports Union, sport and physical recreation activities were coordinated at a club level long before that date. Clubs such as Tennis, Cricket, Rowing, Football and Lacrosse had developed ties with local sporting clubs as well as interstate universities for intervarsity tournaments since the late 19th century. In 1883, the University

Above: University Women's Tennis Club plaque showing victories in the 1920s. (University of Melbourne Archives)

Athletics Association was established to support sportsmen and clubs. This association was the predecessor of the Melbourne University Sports Union, now named the Melbourne University Sports Association.

Over the years, the University of Melbourne Archives has acquired numerous photographs of past championship teams, club minutes, correspondence and other documentation from the early history of sport at the University. However, there seems to be less emphasis in the latter part of the 20th century on preserving our sporting history. Gaps in the University's sporting history timeline are evident, particularly in recent years, with the advent of email and websites for club communication, rather than the traditional recording of minutes in club minutes books.

Today, most clubs seem disconnected from the significance of the Melbourne University Sports Association's centenary celebrations, with club administrators focussing on the contemporary issues and needs of their specific sporting pursuits, rather than displaying interest in the history of their sport. However, attempts to document and preserve current records, photographs, trophies and pennants that highlight our sporting achievements and club administration methods are to be recommended.

Intervarsity Tournaments

The first intervarsity men's tennis match was held in 1906 between the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney. The Melbourne team emerged victorious on that day, and so



The women's tennis team, University of Melbourne, photographer and date unknown, probably between 1910 and 1915, 13.5 x 8 cm. (University of Melbourne Archives, UMA/I/1206)

commenced the great rivalry between the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney. Four years later, the first intervarsity women's tennis match was held and the Sydney team won the tournament. The details of these matches along with photographs were documented at the time, for future generations to read, and can be found in the Archives. Details of the long-lived University rivalry should warm the hearts of current Team Melbourne supporters and participants, particularly as our University was once again victorious over the University of Sydney at the Australian University Games this year. Thus, 98 years after the first tennis victory over the University of Sydney, the current University of Melbourne women's tennis team won the gold medal again. Hopefully records of the continued rivalry between the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney will be available for future generations to celebrate, and take pride in, their sporting history.



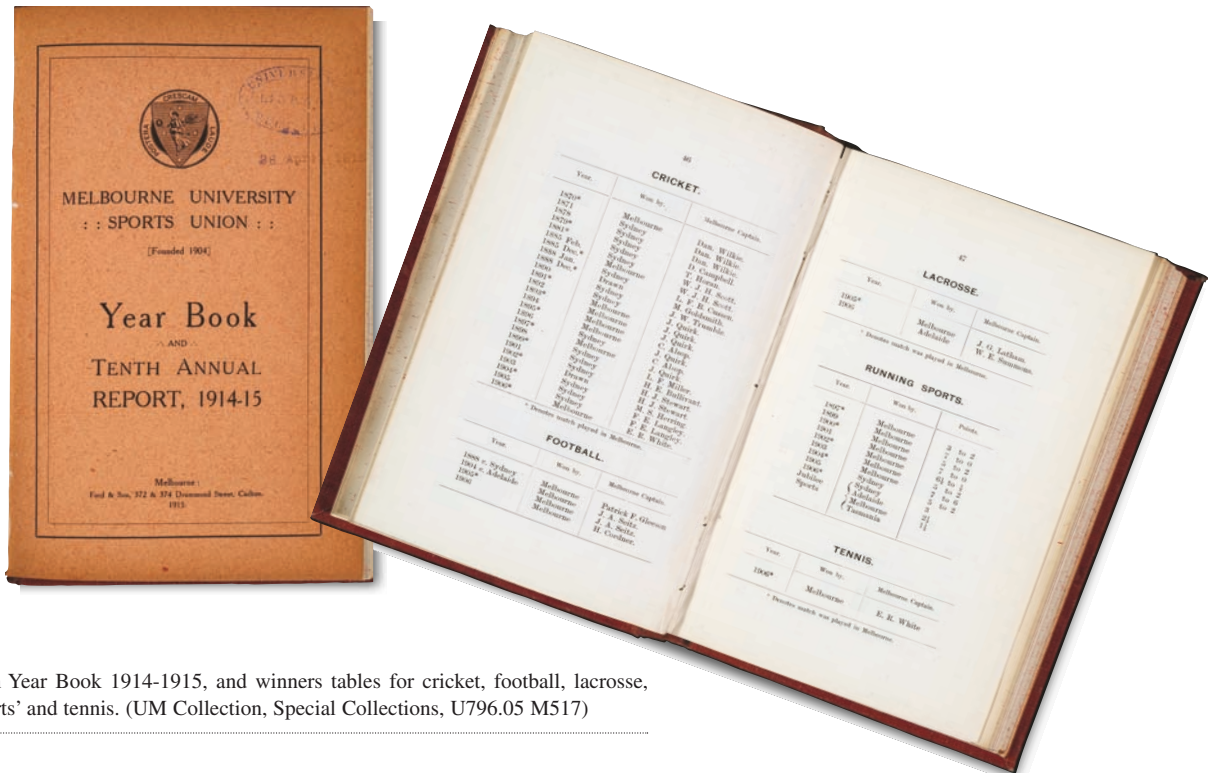
Members of the 2004 University of Melbourne Tennis Team who competed at the Australian University Games in Perth. The author is at the left of the photo.

Women in Sport

In 1887, an article in *The Melbourne University Review* revealed that nine 'ladies' had joined the Tennis Club. The ladies were entitled to join the club as tennis was deemed to be an acceptable past-time for them. In just a year, the popularity of tennis seemingly increased as more women entered the University, as evidenced by the numerous women who wore bright blue dresses. The women who played an afternoon game of tennis did not have facilities in which to change into their sporting attire, so they adopted a tennis costume: a blue skirt with a white flannel jacket bodice, a sailor hat with blue and white ribbons and a scarf with blue and black stripes that could also be worn as street wear. That uniform tradition continues more than a century later and women who play tennis competitively for the University still wear bright blue and black tennis gear.

Many women greatly enjoyed participating in a regular afternoon game of social tennis, although women's

access to the tennis courts was effectively limited by the male-dominated Tennis Club. It was not until 1893 that women were given an opportunity to coordinate their own tennis activities and tournaments. In that year, Mr George Higgins, president of the University Athletics Association presented a tennis court to the Women Students (past and present) of the Melbourne University, and the University Women Students Tennis Club was established. The women's club had a shaky development due to a lack of funding, and few women were actually able to represent the University in competitions: in its early days tournaments were organised in which only four players were allowed to compete. Tennis opportunities for the collective of women faced a further setback in 1905 when the club was denied full representation with the male-dominated Melbourne University Sports Union. Correspondence from the Melbourne University Sports Union to



Sports Union Year Book 1914-1915, and winners tables for cricket, football, lacrosse, 'running sports' and tennis. (UM Collection, Special Collections, U796.05 M517)

the University Women Students Tennis Club recommended 'that the Women Students Tennis Club be recognised as a club within the Sports Union but as its subscription is less than 7/6 ... the club cannot have representation on council'.

Tennis Facilities

The colleges at the University were instrumental in popularising sport at the University. Rivalries between Trinity and Ormond Colleges were fostered during the college tennis competitions that began in 1882. The concept of playing tennis at the University became more widespread when on 17 October 1883, the University Athletics Association proposed that two asphalt tennis courts be built at a cost of £160. Over the years, as social and competitive tennis gained in popularity with men and women alike, all the college tennis courts and the six University tennis courts were in high demand.

The social aspect of the competitions was almost as important as

the game played. The team hosting the competition would provide an afternoon tea following the match for the competitors to enjoy the company of other sportsmen and women. The need for a place at the University for hosting such activities was paramount at the turn of the 20th century. In 1910 a new pavilion was erected for the Tennis Club to host these functions. The social side of tennis was greatly restricted when in December 1940 the pavilion burnt down. While a new pavilion was planned, the Tennis Club at the time was unable to finance the new, improved pavilion, therefore the project was shelved and never revived.

There are many lessons that current University sportspeople and club administrators can learn from our sporting history. Our forefathers have established a sporting heritage that features intervarsity competition, participation for members of the University community, and social interaction through sport. Perhaps there is something to learn from the early days of the Tennis Club, where 'grace

and style' were regarded as commendable qualities, as noted in archived documents. We should endeavour to continue the fine example set by the pioneers of sport at the University of Melbourne.

Lisa Ng has been involved with the Melbourne University Tennis Club since 1996 and has been the President of the Club for the past four years. Melbourne University Women's Tennis Team recently won gold at the Australian University Games in Perth. Lisa is also a project officer in the Information Division at the University.

Sources

- June Senyard, *The Ties that Bind: a history of sport at the University of Melbourne*, Petersham, NSW, Walla Walla Press, 2004.
- Melbourne University Athletics Club, Minutes (1883–1894), University of Melbourne Archives, Accession No. 82/14.
- Melbourne University Tennis Club, Minutes (1891–1940), University of Melbourne Archives, Accession No. 82/7.
- Melbourne University Women's Tennis Club, Minutes (1893–1942), University of Melbourne Archives, Accession No. 82/12.