

## The Colorado State Open

By Richard Hillway

The winner's list for the Colorado State Open Tennis Championship reads like a Who's Who of American Tennis. The men's singles titleists include George Lott (1932), 18-year-old Don Buldge (1933), Bobby Riggs (1937), Joe Hunt (1938), Gene Mako (1939), 20-year-old Jack Kramer (1942), Tony Trabest (1954), Alex Olmedo (1957), Barry Mackay (1958) and Mexico's Rafael Osuna (1960). Some of the top women winners are Dodo Bundy Cheney of Santa Monica (1936,37,39,40,42,54), English Angela Mortimer (1955), Althea Gibson (1956,57), Dorothy Head Knode (1958) and the beautiful South African Sandra Reynolds (1959).



The tournament has a long history tracing back to 1886 when Colorado's first state tournament began on the sole clay tennis court of the Denver Lawn Tennis Club in downtown Denver. In 1891 it moved to the 5 day courts of the Denver Athletic Club and was called the Rocky Mountain Tennis Championships. It moved to the prestigious Denver Country Club in 1907 where it lived most of its glory days as the Colorado State Championships, later the Colorado State Open. By 1968 it had transferred again to the newly formed Colorado Racquet Club. The Gates Tennis Center took over the tournament in 1975 and still hosts it.

In the early years, this tournament was dominated by Colorado players, many of whom had developed where games while at Eastern Guy League Universities. Visitor Samuel Neel who had earlier won the U.S. doubles with brother Carr, took our title in 1903. He was defeated the next year by wealthy 1889 Yale graduate Clarence P. Dodge who had moved to Colorado Springs and won the state tournament in 1904,05,06 and 10 before winning the French Covered Courts Championship Doubles with Wimbledon winner Anthony Wilding. For the 39 years from 1922 through 1960, the competition was so tough that W. L. Coleman of Corpas Christi, Texas won in 1922 and 1923 to start this dominance by out-of-state players. Then the club fathers invited Paul Bennett of Iowa, Canadian Davis Cupper and later Northwestern coach, to prevent Coleman from retiring the beautiful silver cup that went permanently to any 3-time winner. Bennett succeeded. Powerful Bruce Veton his opponent slipped something into his drink. A couple of weeks after America's #2 ranked player George Lott won the 1932 tourney, his Denver host family received a bill for 2 new suits the player purchased.

Denver Country Club Member, Mrs. Lawrence Phipps, wife of former U.S. Senator, had California connection and encouraged top young California players on their way east to the grass court circuit and the U.S. nationals to play in Denver's event. They received free room, board and transportation as they worked their way through Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago and other cities where they were wined and dined during "tennis week." Young Don Budge still first year to play on Eastern grass where he found that the grip didn't work. He went on to win the 1<sup>st</sup> ever Grand Slam in 1938. Sixteen-year-old Bobby Riggs set out for the 1934 Colorado tournament with his friend driving but they didn't get far before the car wrecked. Twelve-year-old Denverite Frank Shafroth was playing poker along with Jack Kramer at the club during one tournament, even though his father had forbidden it. He knew his father was about to pick him up but Frank had such a great hand that he stayed in the game. He won but got caught. Joan Bisbland, club member, was leading Althea Gibson in the 1<sup>st</sup> set of an early round but saw the scowls on the faces of committee members who had paid Gibson \$1000 to bring in a crowd. Joan went on to lose 8-6,6-2. The Club hoisted flags representing the countries of foreign players. One year a flag was hung upside-down by mistake so the player from that country refused to compete until the error was corrected.

Country club members Bud Robineau and top players Gardmar Mulloy brought in International players during the 1950's. Australian Lew Hood came in 1956, India's Ramonathan Krishman and South Africa's Sandra Reynolds won in 1959, and Mexico's Rafael Osuna won in 1960.

By 1961, the players' demands had become too high. They wanted more money under the table at this "amateur" tournament, and they became less content to stay with families. They demanded paid hotel rooms. So Colorado players again began winning the Colorado State Open.