



Tennis lingo: War of the Words

Think you know your tennis talk? Perhaps not as well as CHRIS NORTHEY, who takes us through the top 10 tennis terms.

Tennis is a funny old game. People *love* you one minute and then want to *drop* you the next; someone is always waiting to shout out your *faults*; and no matter how nice you are somebody is always taking *advantage* of you.

But listen carefully, as all is not necessarily what it seems on a tennis court. These and many other tennis terms have been used since the game evolved from the French game *jeu de palme*, the forerunner to tennis in the 18th Century. And although you may hear the occasional

scream, shout or outburst on court, the origins of some of the tennis words today may be a little less heated than their usage today or maybe they won't.

So let's have a look at our list of the top 10 tennis terms and find out how they came into the world of tennis explosively or quietly.

Let's start off with the word:

1. Tennis

We are happy to step onto court and hit a ball over the net with a racquet and play a game called tennis, but what does the word tennis actually mean? There have been several attempts to pinpoint the exact origins of the word tennis, but the closest one seems to derive from *tenez* the command form of the French verb *Tenir*, which means to hold. This is what players in 13th century France would shout out before hitting the ball to their opponent when playing the game *jeu de palme*. It

literally meant are you ready to receive me or in other words, I am ready to serve! But if you tried that today on court, you'd probably get a warning from the umpire! So be careful.

2. Stroke

We stroke the ball in tennis and do it with the backhand or the forehand. It's origin as David Studham, the Librarian at the Museum of Sport at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in Melbourne agrees comes from rowing and industry in the eighteenth century where the word was used to describe the action of a single pull of an oar on a boat or the movement of a piece of machinery. Pretty harmless then.

3. Let

Anything can happen to interrupt a game of tennis. From a stray pigeon perching on the net to a raucous sneeze from somebody in the crowd or just passing-by. This tennis word is used to

tell somebody to replay a point because something or someone has temporarily stopped play. Its origins stem from the Old Saxon word *lettian* which meant to hinder or prevent something from happening. Lets in the 12th Century were also known as obstacles, so when you hear the word let on a tennis court today, instead of there being a delay due to a herd of stubborn cows blocking an entrance, the interruption to play might just be because somebody was simply just not ready to receive serve.

4. Love

Sometimes there is anything but love on a tennis court especially in the heat of a battle, so why did this word come into the game of tennis? According to etymologists, the word love is possibly derived from the French word *l'oeuf* which literally means egg. If we look at the shape of an egg we can see it resembles zero and therefore came to be used when somebody has no score in tennis. Another possible theory again to do with the word egg is that when somebody has no score in sport people have said in the past that they have egg on their face. So next time when you are 40 love down, remember it's no yolk!

5. Seed

One of the main purposes of any tournament or competition, not just in tennis, is to make sure the best players do not face each other until later on in the competition. This is good for both spectators and the players themselves. According to many linguists this word stems from the word to sow and derives from the world of gardening where small seedlings are scattered at the front of a patch with the larger ones at the back so they do not bump into each other when they are growing.

6. Ace

To hit an unreturnable serve in tennis. The origin of the tennis meaning of this word dates back to around the 18th Century where an Ace in cards meant excellence. However the idea of producing a perfect shot that cannot be touched seems to stem from World War I terminology where fighter pilots who shot down 10 or more enemy planes were known as 'aces of the air.' So when tennis players today throw their ball into the air and lock on to their targets trying to ace their opponents, instead of doing it wielding a machine gun they do it with a tennis racquet. A much prettier sight!

7. Volley

This is yet another word which seems to stem from military vocabulary. According to the etymology dictionary, a volley in 1570 meant the firing of a number of guns at the same time. Taking the idea of ammunition flying through the air from both sides of the battle field, the notion of hitting a flying 'ball of ammunition' came into being on the tennis court in around 1819. So next time you stand at the net and get ready to blast your opponent's ball away for a winner remember it is war.

8. Lob

This is a funny word. Literally, as its early meaning derives from the Old English word *lobbes* which meant clown. And there's no funnier sight to see, than drawing your opponent into the net and lobbing the ball over their head seeing them scramble back after it. Just ask Mansour Bharami who is considered by many to be the ultimate clown of exhibition tennis who likes nothing more than lobbing the ball over famous players' heads.

9. Deuce

If you listen to the pronunciation 'juice' you could forgive yourself for thinking that this word means to be in a 'tight

squeeze' at 40 points each. But alas the origins of this tennis word seem to be again from the French language where the term *a deux de jeux* means to be two points away from the game. Early etymological definitions around 1760 also state though that deuce could mean bad luck or the devil, which if you look at a tough professional tennis match today, could also ring true, with the loser of the game potentially losing a lot more than just their pride.

10. Grand Slam

And to the last of our top 10 tennis words. According to David Studham a tennis specialist at the Sport Museum in Melbourne this is one of the most incorrectly used tennis terms. When a tennis player wins a major tournament such as Wimbledon, the Australian Open, the US Open or Roland Garros then they are said to have won a Slam. Not a Grand Slam which is often used instead. The origins of the phrase Grand Slam, however, date back to the 1930s when the then famous Jack Crawford, an Australian tennis player was at his best and had just won three of the Slams in the same year and was chasing the US Open. An American journalist by the name of John Kieran wrote in his column that Jack Crawford had 'nearly won something that didn't exist,' a Grand Slam which was a term he borrowed from the card game Bridge. And so the term Grand Slam was born. The act of winning all four Slams in one year. So if that question pops up in a pub quiz, you'll do David Studham proud by knowing the correct way to use this mountainous tennis term.

So there you have it. Tennis is a melting pot of military, French and obscure terms, so if you do happen to experience or hear a fiery moment on court, then maybe the players themselves are not to blame. It might, just might be because of the origins of the words they use. But to quote another famous tennis player, 'you cannot be serious.' Of course not! ■