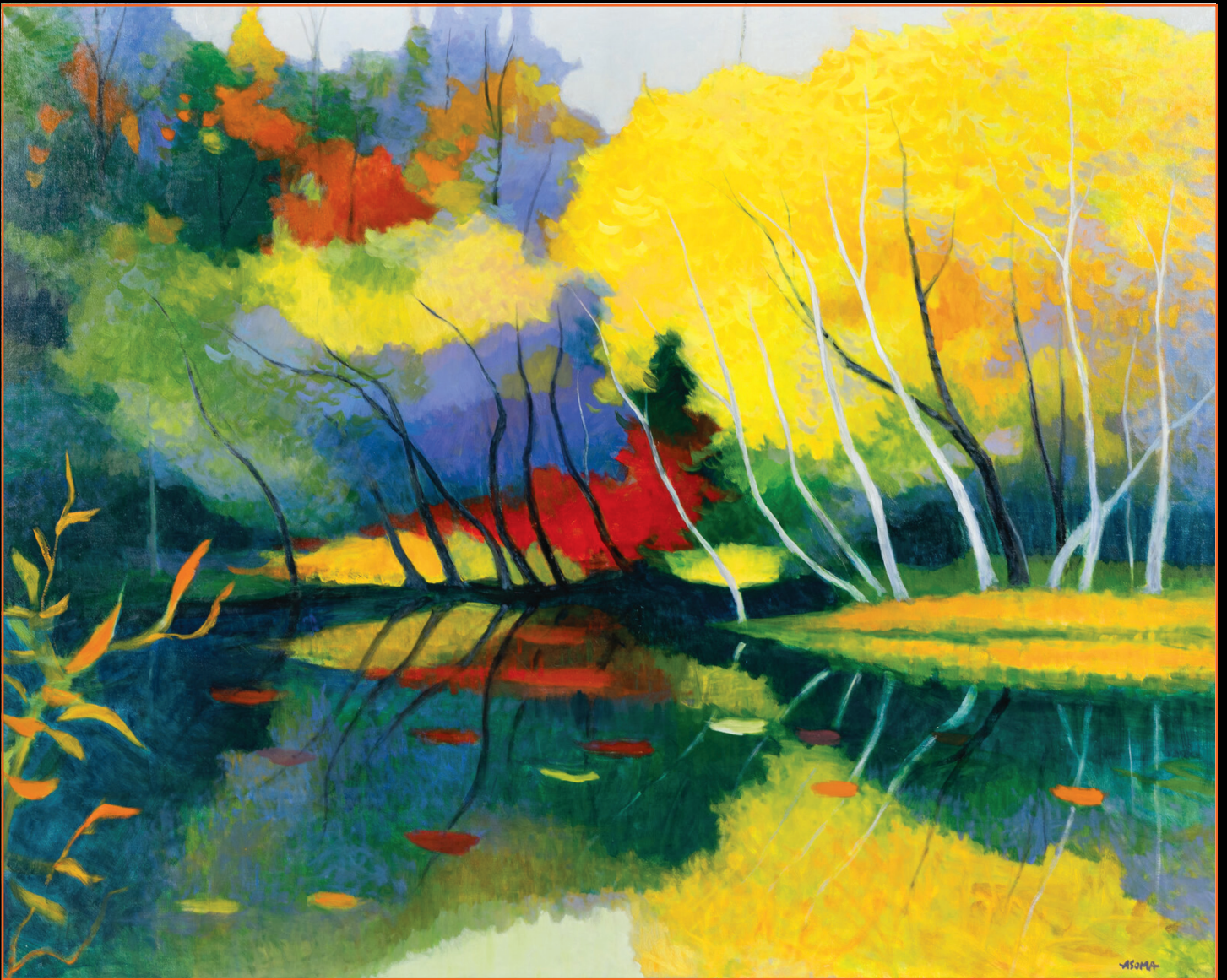


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Jumping on the Badminton Bandwagon



THE BADMINTON CLUB OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

By Elyssa Wolf

EVERY SATURDAY in New York City for the last 147 years, the same club has met to play badminton. From Victorian times, through World Wars, and amidst the ever-changing landscape of New York, individuals have gathered together, racquets in hand, forming the Badminton Club of the City of New York.

Originating from the racquet game *poona* played by British officers in India in the 1860s, badminton was named for Badminton House, the country estate of the Duke of Beaufort, where the game was first played in England. The sport evolved from the centuries-old game of ‘battledore and shuttlecock,’ played

throughout Europe. Played with thin, light racquets and a shuttlecock, also known as a “bird” or “birdie,” badminton is one of the most popular racquet sports across the globe, notably in Asia, Europe, and North America. Though the game was not an official Olympic sport until the 1992 Summer Olympics, the sport has had a long history, an important part of which is still alive and well in New York.

Considering that badminton was first played in 1873 in England, it was the “hot new thing” from across the pond when the Badminton Club of the City of New York (BCCNY) was established in 1878. When Bayard Clarke and E.

L. Wilks returned from their world travels in 1878, they joined together to introduce to New York the game they had witnessed in India and England. Alongside their sisters and fellow co-founders, Lilly Clarke and Alice E. Wilks, the foursome established the Badminton Club of the City of New York. Now, in its 147th year, the club is proudly the oldest badminton club in the world. Just as the Social Register, founded only a few years after the BCCNY, was recognized as the arbiter of society, the Badminton Club was the cornerstone of late nineteenth-century New York society.

At the time of its founding, the



Previous Page: Two couples enjoy a game of badminton in India in 1874.

Left: Taiwan's Wang Chi-lin plays a shot in the men's doubles badminton final match against China during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games at Porte de la Chapelle Arena in Paris on August 4, 2024. Taiwan won the gold medal.

“The exhibition with two young men and two young women to each side was most genteel, most refined, almost stationary and, to spectators sophisticated in a faster game, vastly amusing. There was more amusement when the young men couldn't resist swatting [the shuttlecock] with a most undecorous wallop, as they did once in a while.”

Seventy-one years after this festive celebration, the Badminton Club of the City of New York is as active as ever.

Fellow Social Register member, Austin Bramwell, has a long family legacy with the BCCNY, and happily reflected on the joys and history of the club, as well as his family's longtime involvement. In 1953, Bramwell's aunt, Edith Bramwell, joined the festively clad celebrants in Victorian garb for the BCCNY's 75th anniversary ceremonies. Even earlier, an 1890 *New York Daily Tribune* article mentions a “Messr. E. Perry Bramwell” as one of the club's esteemed members. Bramwell's grandparents played badminton together and his parents, accomplished attorney William Moffat Bramwell Jr. and Wall Street pioneer and founding manager of Gabelli Growth Fund Elizabeth Reed Bramwell, met in the club, and continued to play for the rest of their lives.

Bramwell's mother, Elizabeth, loved the sport so much, that, touchingly, her weekly badminton game was the last thing she did prior to her sudden passing in 2015. As Bramwell bittersweetly recollected, his mother played a

Badminton Club functioned as a social gathering for the young debutantes and bachelors of New York's ‘Knickerbocker set.’ The names of old New York society decorate the club's nineteenth-century silver championship cups. Astor, Vanderbilt, and van Rensselaer are just some of the prominent New York families whose sons and daughters partook in the club's lively meetings. Young men and women gathered weekly throughout the winter and spring at the 71st Regiment Armory for a few hours of dignified play, tea, and genteel conversation. Women wore gowns and men were finely dressed. New York social columns printed descriptions of the Saturday meetings and the club's illustrious co-ed members. While love of the sport grew, and its players became more skilled in play, the club also served to “relieve the dullness of the Lenten season,” and was, as an 1890 *New York Times* article stated, “New York's fashionable Lenten pastime.” As its membership rapidly expanded and the sport became more vigorous, what began as a respectable way for ladies and gentlemen to gather socially, evolved from a merely conversational form of play, to a more athletic one.

Tournaments were introduced for both men and women seeking to win one of the club's coveted championship cups. Debutantes married and continued to play the sport into later adulthood, eventually encouraging their progeny to continue in the footsteps of their badminton-loving elders. Badminton's New York circle expanded, and the BCCNY's membership is now comprised of a diverse and international membership reflecting badminton's global popularity.

In March of 1953, the Badminton Club of the City of New York celebrated their 75th anniversary. A *New York Times* article chronicling the festivities described the historically focused affair as a refined and fun day complete with nineteenth-century period dress, a horse and carriage, and a nostalgic look back at the club's founding during its opening ceremonies. Tea was served and sipped demurely. The article quipped, “Tea is to formal badminton what the stacking of brooms is to curling, almost hallowed.” Alongside silver tea sets, cakes, and finger sandwiches, an exhibition game was played in the style of 1880s badminton play. The 1953 article playfully remarked,

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beautiful drop shot, collapsed and quickly passed away. “She went out on a winner.” Bramwell himself has carried the torch of his family’s badminton heritage, as an active BCCNY member and former president of the club just like his father and grandfather before him.

Bramwell rediscovered the joys of badminton in adulthood. Playing only sporadically as a child, upon returning to New York after college, Bramwell and his then fiancée became regular members of the BCCNY. He recollected, “if you’re new to the city, it’s a wonderful place to meet some friendly people and get some exercise.” Now reintroduced to the sport, when Bramwell moved to Colorado for work, he and his wife joined the Boulder Badminton Club. Playing twice a week, Bramwell and his wife improved their skills prior to their return to New York and the home comforts of the BCCNY. The pair have played ever since, and now include their children in the family activity.

Today, the sport requires agility, speed, and a loose touch to keep up with the fast-paced game. Bramwell, “obviously biased,” opined that badminton is a “superior racquet sport to all of the others.” Having played squash in his earlier days, still maintaining his tennis game, and having recently dabbled in the increasingly popular game of pickleball, Bramwell’s love of badminton has only grown. “The natural thing you want to do with a stick in your hand and a ball to hit is to hit [the ball] as hard as you possibly can. In other racquet sports, notably tennis, you have to overcome that natural instinct,” Bramwell observed. In badminton, “you can hit as hard as you can.” The game is incredibly fast as the lightweight shuttlecock is rallied quickly across the court. Bramwell also mentioned that badminton is a “complement” to other racquet sports.



Racquet sports enthusiasts can pick up a badminton racquet assured that their tennis or squash swings will not suffer.

Nowadays, the Badminton Club of the City of New York boasts a membership of more than 100 members, many of whom are fellow Social Register Association members. Every Saturday morning from November through April, its members enjoy friendly competition at courts on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Both a summer activity played on lawns and a winter one played inside, the BCCNY continues its historical role as a means to pass the chilly winter months. One of the most attractive qualities of the BCCNY is its access to ample court space. Bramwell explained, “if you really love the sport, the problem is that it’s hard to get court time. There is more demand than there is supply.” The club’s reliable gatherings ensure that all interested in playing can practice their “smash,” “clear,” and “drop” shots with weekly regularity.

From novice players still learning one

Above: Club members enjoy a lively doubles match. Today, the sport requires agility, speed, and a loose touch to keep up with the fast-paced game.

end of the shuttlecock from the other, to former professional athletes, and every level of ability in between, the BCCNY’s members share an enthusiasm for the game and a delight in being able to play. For those wishing to improve their game, the club’s pro is available for lessons, but all experienced members are “eager to teach.” Players of all ages grace the courts weekly. The game is easier on the joints than other racquet sports, so many players continue to enjoy the game well into their 80s and 90s. Such is the active and cheerful community of the Badminton Club.

Asked about the club’s current traditions, and whether tea was still an integral part of the club’s ethos, Bramwell laughed, saying that he does remember tea being served during club meetings when he was a child. Members continue to try to honor this




Above: From novice players still learning one end of the shuttlecock from the other, to former professional athletes, and every level of ability in between, the BCCNY's members share an enthusiasm for the game and a delight in being able to play.

part of their club's traditions, but today, members also regularly socialize after their Saturday matches at a nearby gastropub. The club's social origins remain at the heart of the club. An elegant cocktail party welcomes the start of the badminton season, and an annual luncheon, an end-of-season party, and summertime events are just part of the BCCNY's social calendar. Round robin games and championship tournaments liven up New York's cold early spring days, and once a year, BCCNY members unite with members of the Larchmont Badminton Club for a day of social play.

The BCCNY's winter season culminates in championship tournaments that stretch back to the club's earliest days. Everyone is encouraged to play in the tournaments, with players of all levels taking part in competition. While tournaments are friendly and welcoming, the competition can be stiff. Last year, one of the club's members who is an "extraordinary" talent, having been the former National Badminton Champion of Morocco, partook in

the championship tournament. In an "amazing" men's finals match, a new member claimed victory over the former Olympian, demonstrating not only the spectacle of badminton at its finest, but also the club's high caliber of play. "Not quite Olympic quality, but some of the best badminton you'll find," Bramwell said, recounting the exciting results of last year's men's singles championship tournament. Now nearing its 150th anniversary, the Badminton Club of the City of New York has no plans to slow down.

For the uninitiated, the world of recreational and competitive badminton may seem a wholly foreign one. Yet, as Bramwell noted, badminton is everywhere; "you just need to know where to look." From India to the Netherlands, England to Indonesia, or California to New York, there are shuttlecocks whizzing through the air and players racing across courts. Whether badminton is a great passion or a burgeoning interest, the sport offers a light-hearted and exciting game to all who choose to pick up a racquet. 

Below: Angela Capangpangan and Joie A. Anderson.



Below: Current President Edie Meyer and board member David Soares.



Below: Emily Driscoll and Sarah M. Bramwell holding the BCCNY's silver championship cup.





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