THE SWEDISH MIRACLE

John Barrett

Blame it on Borg. It was the phenomenal achievement in the late 1970s of the blond young Viking with the flowing mane and the rolling gait, as he plundered so many of the game's greatest titles with seeming invincibility, that started the revolution. Between 1973 and 1980 the number of tennis players in Sweden doubled. Now, a decade after his first major success – the capture of the French Open in 1974 as a 17-year-old – four of Bjorn's fellow Swedes have ended 1984 ranked among the top 11 in the world – Mats Wilander (4), Anders Jarryd (6), Henrik Sundstrom (7) and Joakim Nystrom (11); a fifth, the 1983 World Junior Champion, Stefan Edberg, was at No. 20.

For any nation (apart from the United States with its huge tennis community) that would have been a remarkable feat. For Sweden, with a total population of 8.5 million and only 125,000 registered tennis players, plus another estimated 275,000 who play occasionally, it is a miracle. And yet, hard as it is to believe after so much success, in this sports-mad country where 2.5 million of the energetic inhabitants participate regularly in some form of athletic activity, tennis is only the eighth most popular sport in terms of affiliated members.

As Borg grew into a national hero, it became the dream of every youngster who wielded a racket to emulate him. The municipalities throughout Sweden were beseiged by frustrated parents who could not find anywhere for their children to play or anyone to teach them. Accordingly the local authorities were forced to embark upon an ambitious building programme, and with the northern climate allowing only a four-month outdoor season, that meant indoor courts. For future generations that stark reality was a blessing indeed, for today the Swedish Tennis Association's facilities committee can boast some 1,400 permanent indoor courts. Some 200 of them are in Stockholm, the rest are dotted around the country – in twos and threes in small towns, in fours and sixes in larger towns – to provide ample opportunity for anyone with ambition. The proof that the system does indeed work can be found by looking at the home-towns of the five present leaders. They all come from different towns (not one is from Stockholm) and Nystrom hails from Skellefta, right up in the north of Sweden, where it would have been impossible to emerge without cheap indoor facilities.

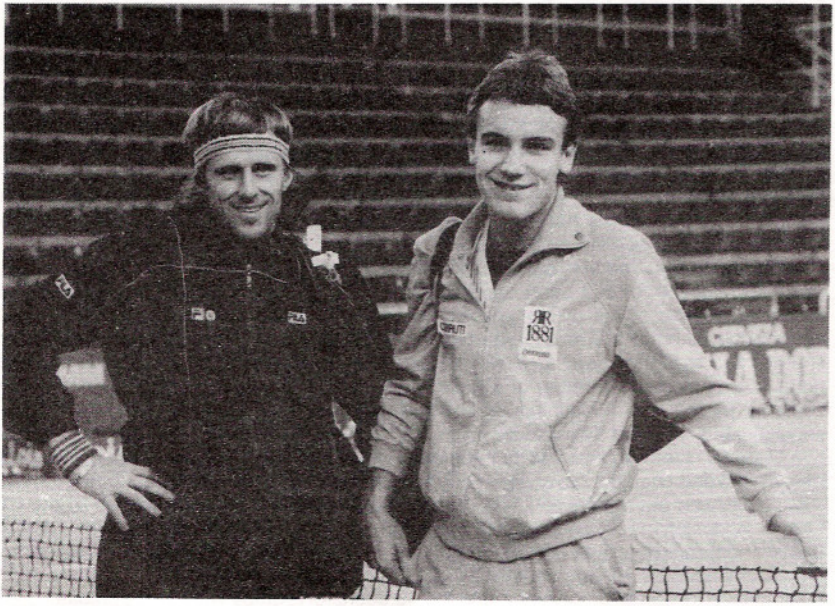
This question of modest cost is another vital factor. The whole ethos surrounding Swedish sport is centred upon opportunity – the opportunity for any boy or girl with ability, regardless of his or her financial position, to be able to develop it and, most importantly, to enjoy it. The average tennis club, which often belongs to the members, charges $10 to $20 per year as a membership fee, which merely gives advance booking rights. Otherwise any member of the public can walk into any club and play on any free court by paying the modest hourly charges of $6–9. The structure perfectly fits the sophisticated nature of Swedish socialism. Through each of the country's 23 Administrative Districts, the Swedish Sports Federation, founded in 1903, provides over the year many weekend courses, covering a wide range of subjects such as club administration, psychology and physiology and – in co-operation with the regional branches of the 57 Sports Associations – courses for trainers, umpires, officials and so on. Central Government makes an annual grant of $22–25 million to the Swedish Sports Federation; the county councils provide another $4–5 million for educational activities and the local authorities a further $70 million to help the 40,000 sports clubs with their pursuits.

It is all very well-integrated. Not only are there weekend courses for performers; the administrators and coaches are trained too. Herein lies the hidden strength of the

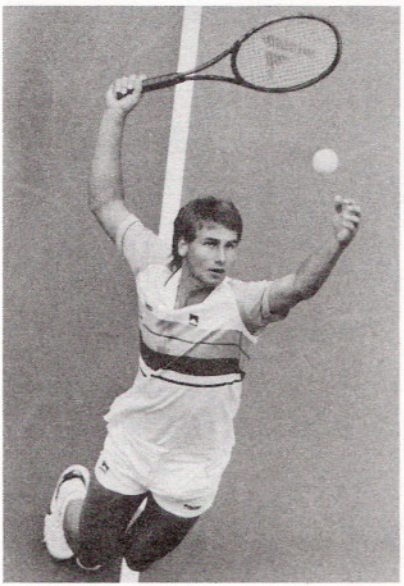
Swedish system. In every sport there are large numbers of amateur helpers – organisers and coaches, who are often former high-level performers past the age of competition – who give up their time to help the next generation. The Svenska Tennisforbundet, for example, have trained approximately 8,000 amateur coaches and helpers during the past decade. Superimposed on this structure are the activities of the Svenska Tennisforbundet's main committees, each of which is mirrored at District level and again at Club level. Coaching for the most promising of the young players is easily organised by these local organisations who nationally employ some 300 professional coaches, some full-time others part-time, based in selected clubs.

The Swedish Tennis Association's share of the Government's grant is about $300,000 which represents a quarter of the total income of $1·25 million. The balance comes from the Davis Cup (all the Swedish players sign contracts by which they agree to play for nothing in return for the help they received as juniors), from the Swedish Championships in Bastad, membership fees from affiliated clubs ($65,000 per year), from TV and radio fees, from equipment testing fees and, increasingly, from commercial sponsorship. Only about 6·25 per cent of the total income can be spared for junior training, which explains why the amateur coaches play such a vital role in the development chain.

The base of the pyramid is impressively wide, simply because the dedicated parents bring their offspring at an early age to the 'Short Tennis' sessions that are used to encourage the 5-8-year-olds to enjoy the experience of hitting a moving ball. These weekly meetings with their friends are not strictly coaching sessions but rather a way of detecting early whether or not a child has natural ball sense. In a strict but friendly atmosphere the youngsters learn, early and unconsciously, the need for discipline, and they really enjoy themselves because the sponge ball offers no danger of injury and the gentle nature of the bounce gives them a marvellous opportunity to sustain lengthy rallies. To watch a group of five- or six-year-olds at one of these sessions is to know that they will grow to love tennis for the sheer joy it offers of performing a difficult skill well.



Bjorn Borg (left) whose prodigious achievements inspired Mats Wilander (right) and a whole generation of young Swedes. *(T. Hindley)*



Left: *Henrik Sundstrom's powerful serve.* ***Right:*** *Anders Jarryd stands over the Simonsson brothers, Stefan (left) and Hans at the end of a training session. (T. Hindley)*

Leif Dahlgren, the Director of Education for the Swedish Association, does not underestimate the importance of parental attitudes. 'Without the wholehearted co-operation of the parents no youngster, however talented, will succeed. If Bjorn Borg's parents had not been prepared to drive 20 miles a day in each direction to give Bjorn the early coaching with Percy Rosberg how could he have developed?'

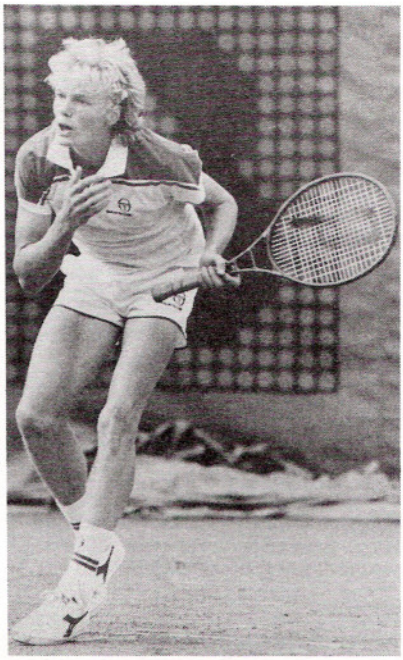
At the top of the pyramid are the national squads in each of the age groups – 14-and-under, 16-and-under and 18-and-under, which are the responsibility of one (or sometimes two) selected coaches. For the very best of the senior 18-and-under players of 1981 lay the SIAB sponsored squad, the vehicle through which (thanks to the $125,000 the building company was prepared to invest each year) Wilander, Jarryd, Nystrom and Hans Simonsson emerged in senior tennis under the sympathetic control of former Davis Cup captain, Jan Anders Sjogren. This scheme was the forerunner of commercially sponsored national and local teams. Even the most optimistic supporters of the original scheme could hardly have envisaged the immediate success they achieved in 1982 when Wilander won the French Open at the age of 17 years, 9 months and 6 days, the youngest and the first unseeded player ever to win a Grand Slam Championship. Following Borg's exploits, this extraordinary achievement – along with the doubles success of Jarryd and Simonsson at the same Championships the following year – guaranteed that the tennis boom in Sweden would accelerate.

The last, vital ingredient in this well-planned structure is competition. With regular weekend and annual competitions within the clubs and regions, it is inevitable that the strongest characters will emerge to earn selection for the national and international tournaments and team matches, plus the annual training camps, that are the recognised pathways to success. And because the competition is so widespread and begins around the age of 10 or 11, the ultimate champions in the various age groups can stand comparison with any in the world, as a glance at the honours board of the European Age Group Championships or the Orange Bowl Championships will readily prove. There you will find the same names – Borg, Wilander, Jarryd, Sundstrom, Nystrom and Edberg.

Perhaps the most important of all the domestic competitions is the Kalle Anka (Donald Duck) Cup, the tournament that inspired the present world-wide Sport Goofy Championships. Organised in three age groups for the boys – 11-and-under, 12 to 13 and 14 to 15 – and two for the girls – 12 to 13 and 14 to 15 – this annual event, which began in 1970 with an entry of 1,137, has grown into arguably the largest tournament in the world with more than 13,000 entries per year. Small wonder that the winners of this gigantic event feel confident that they can compete with anyone in the world. You will no longer be surprised to learn that among the past Kalle Anka champions are Borg, Wilander, Sundstrom, Stefan Simonsson and Edberg.

Something that worries the Swedes as much as it puzzles outsiders is the lack of comparable success among the Swedish girls. With all the same opportunities they have only two players in the top 100 – Catarina Lindqvist at 17 and Carina Karlsson at 95 – and little prospect of others joining them. It is an extraordinary contradiction that has no easy answer. Perhaps most telling is the lack of a folk hero in the Borg mould for them to look up to. If planning and effort can solve the problem, then it will soon be licked, for the new Volvo squad under the control of former French Open Champion and Swedish No. 1, Sven Davidson, has all the brightest talent available. However, I have the feeling that girls as pretty and vivacious as the delightful Carina Karlsson, who made such an impression at Wimbledon last year, will find it hard to concentrate solely on her tennis. At least, I'm sure there are plenty of red-blooded young males who will make it hard for her!

Meanwhile the young Swedish males continue to set the pace at all age levels. Next on the senior horizon are the two Carlssons, Johan and Kent (no relation, by the way), who have been mopping up many of the 16 and 18 age-group titles between them, and seem destined to follow a path that is becoming all too familiar – and depressing if you were born outside Sweden! Like Bjorn himself and the entire present crop, these two



Left: *Joakim Nystrom.* ***Right:*** *The latest teenage prodigy, Kent Karlsson.* *(T. Hindley)*

display the same controlled courtesy on court that is so refreshing to spectators. When, in the fullness of time, we look back and try to analyse the contribution this remarkable group of young men have made to our sport, perhaps the most important element will be the restoration of a sense of pride and propriety on the court and a sense of comradeship and delight in the successes of their team-mates off it. I can truly say it is always a delight to be in their company and takes me back to the cameraderie that used to exist among the great Australian players of the 1950s and 60s – men like Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall, Rod Laver, Roy Emerson and Fred Stolle, Neale Fraser, John Newcombe and Tony Roche . . . the list is endless. Come to think of it there is a strong parallel between the two eras with success breeding success. How appropriate that the young Swedes, like those Australians on so many occasions, have just won the Davis Cup.

How far the Swedish miracle has left to run only time will tell. At least they have their priorities right. Leif Dahlgren again . . . 'In Sweden it is a widely accepted idea among trainers and leaders that young players should be trained early gradually to accept full responsibility for their own tennis. The sooner a player realises that whether he is going to become a top player or not depends on him and nobody else . . . the greater are his chances to achieve his goals . . . One might say that the most important job the trainer has to do is to make himself superfluous!'

In fact what the Swede's have done is delightfully simple and holds lessons for the other tennis nations who strive mightily without producing results. By offering nationwide facilities cheaply, combined with coaching and competition, they have given their ambitious youngsters the opportunity to plumb the depths of their own personalities in a way that unlocks the hidden talent; then they have moulded that talent with imaginative leadership and not too much interference. What more could any young player in any country ask?