

A Brief History of Tennis Balls & Containers



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Real Tennis

Real Tennis - one of several games sometimes called "the sport of kings" - is the original racquet sport from which the modern game of tennis is derived. The term "tennis" is thought to originate from the French word *tenez*, which means "take heed" - a warning from the server to the receiver. In one form or another, tennis has been played for over eight hundred years. Real tennis evolved, over three centuries, from an earlier ball game played around the 12th century in France that involved hitting a ball with a bare hand and later with a glove. Sometime in the 16th Century, the glove was replaced with a racquet.

Lawn tennis (or simply tennis) was born out of real tennis in the 18th century and is more the sport we know today. The courts and rules are much less complex than the earlier games.



The Life of Tennis

The game that quickens the eye, steadies the hand, and sets the whole body tingling with a delightful exhilaration depends on the ball.

The Goodrich Lawn Tennis Ball

The original American-made Tennis Ball, is doing for American Lawn Tennis what the Haskell Golf Ball has done for Golf. It has added life and interest to the game, and raised the standard of play. Officially approved by the U. S. N. L. T. A. and enthusiastically endorsed by expert players as equal to the best imported Tennis Balls.

THE GOODRICH is harder and stays harder in play; bounces higher and truer; cover lasts longer without ripping; is always uniform in quality. Every ball a tournament ball, and backed by an unqualified guarantee.

The Haskell Golf Ball

The best known and best liked golf ball in the world
The 1905 Goodrich Hand-book of Lawn Tennis is interesting and a guide to the game. Sent free on request.

THE B. F. GOODRICH CO., Dept. 18 L
Akron, Ohio

An advertisement from 1905 reads:

"The game that quickens the eye, steadies the hand, and sets the whole body tingling with a delightful exhilaration, depends on the ball."

This presentation's main focus will be on tennis balls and the containers they were packaged in.

Tennis Balls Through the Years

Before Charles Goodyear developed vulcanized rubber in 1844, tennis balls were handmade stuffed with cloth, wool or some other filler material. The cores were either wrapped with twine or covered with leather and hand stitched.



Modern-Day Tennis Balls



Even though some of these examples are almost 100 years old, they still represent the construction of the ball used today - a rubber core covered with cloth.

Early Tennis Ball Containers

Before 1926 tennis balls were packaged in quantities of one to twelve in cardboard boxes and paper bags. Balls were often individually wrapped in tissue paper and sold one or two at a time. Although these containers were cheap and convenient, they did little to prolong the life of the ball once it left the factory.

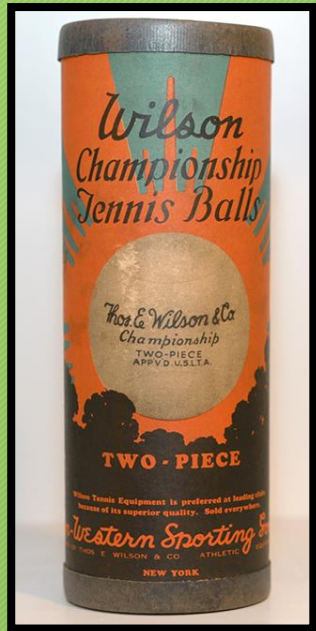


Box with 6 individually wrapped balls



Cardboard box - "3 pack"

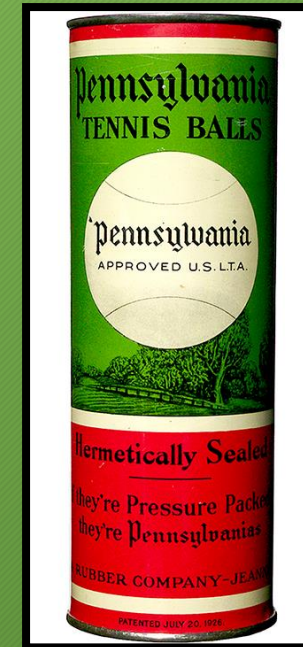
First Pressurized Can - 1926 (Pennsylvania)



1926 3-ball tube

In 1926 the Wilson-Western Sporting Goods Company (today know as Wilson Sporting Goods) introduced a three-ball parchment lined tube to help protect balls against moisture. That same year The Pennsylvania Rubber Company (name later shortened to Penn) developed a hermetically sealed can that kept the balls under pressure to maintain factory freshness for an indefinite period.

Balls that were previously packaged in boxes, bags, and cardboard tubes were now being merchandised in metal tubes with the claim that the balls would never go dead. Before the advent of these hermetically sealed containers, tennis balls, pressurized at 14 PSI, had a very limited shelf life in retail stores. The balls would soon lose their internal pressure and not bounce very well making for poor game play.



1929 3-ball can

“One Minute Old”

Advertisements soon contained such remarks as:

- ✓ No more bouncing ball after ball to find the lively ones!
 - ✓ No more stock on your shelves that can't be sold because the balls have gone dead!
 - ✓ No more wasted time while your customer picks over an open box!
 - ✓ Play with tennis balls **“One Minute Old”*!
-
- “One Minute Old” is referring to the new claim that while still sealed under pressure, the tennis balls would remain in the same state of freshness as when they were packaged at the factory.

**They can't
go dead !**
on your shelves !

... as Tennis Balls
... as Merchandise

**Hermetically
Sealed
under pressure
in metal
tubes**

Ad from 1927 plugging new pressurized metal tubes.

3, 6, and 12 Ball Containers

Even with the advent of the pressurized can, tennis balls were still being sold in cardboard tubes, boxes, and individually wrapped in special protective covers



1937 Cardboard tube with red balls



Box holding 6 balls from The United Kingdom c.1945

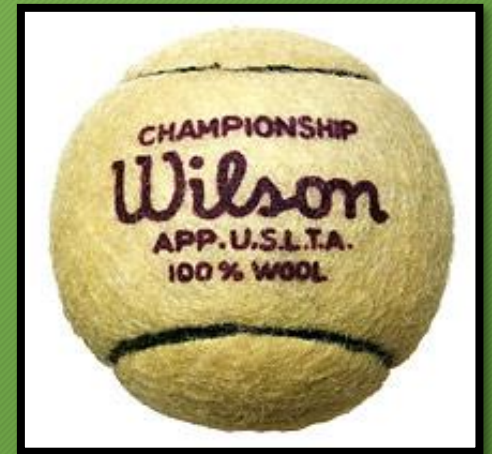


Viscose encased balls from 1929

Synthetic Rubber

In 1941 Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into World War II. Japan seized control of much of Southeast Asia, overrunning the plantations that supplied America with nearly ninety percent of its heavy demand for rubber. War-time rubber priorities were announced that put a quick end to the production of new tennis balls. Fear stricken tennis players devoured retail stocks of balls in one of the greatest buying sprees of the war. Manufacturers were busily researching ways of creating substitutes that would not use crude rubber. Thus was born the "Victory" ball made with synthetic rubber.

The Victory ball differed from the standard ball in that it had black seams instead of white, was inflated by means of a chemical pill, was slightly less lively, and cost about 25% more. Another casualty of the war was the metal tennis can. Metal cans were replaced with cardboard tubes and paper bags from 1941 - 1945.



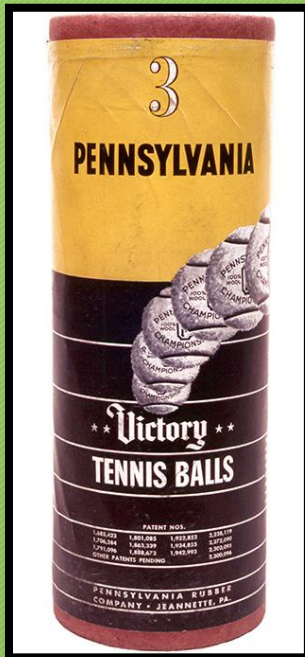
Tennis ball with core made of black synthetic rubber

“Victory” Tennis Balls and Containers

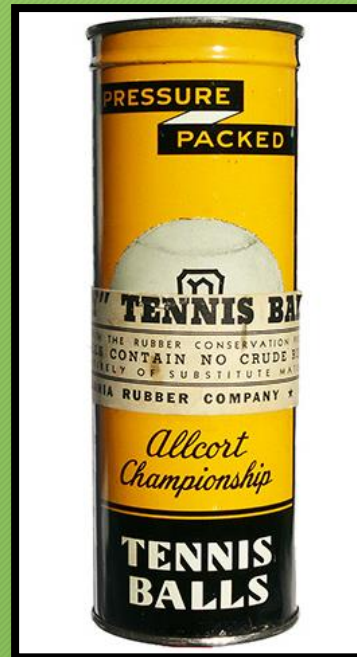
Sometimes manufacturers used metal cans that they already had in stock, but placed a paper label over the can that read something like this:

“VICTORY” TENNIS BALLS

To fully cooperate with the rubber conservation program these Tennis Balls contain no crude rubber, they are made entirely of substitute materials.



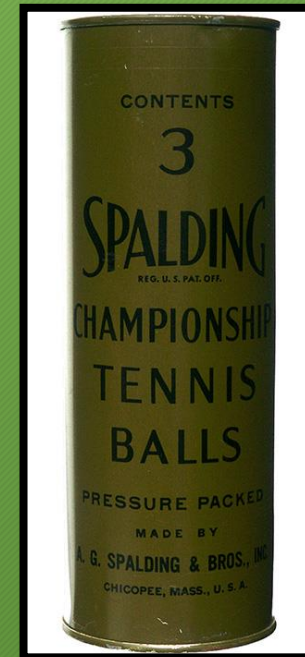
“Victory” cardboard tube



Metal tube with “Victory” label



War-time paper bag



Military issue olive drab can



From 1926 until about 1970, a key was used to unwind a strip of metal that literally tore the top of the can off. The lids from cans made before about 1944 could not be placed back on the can. Later cans were designed so the lid would snap back on the can and hold the balls in place.



The early American can with non-reusable lid is the most desired among collectors.



Later American cans with reusable lids.



A selection of cans from England. Two early cans with disposable lids, and two later with reusable ones.



An attempt to make cans easier to open. Pressurized can with an inner seal and crimped-on lid. No key required to open.



Modern can with easy open pull-tab.



Examples of lids over the decades.

Back row: English lid, American cardboard lid, English cardboard tin-lid, English disc lid

Front: Early American lid, later American lid, later English lid



Various can designs dating from 1929 through the late 1960s

Tennis was once the most popular sport in the world and as a testament to its popularity, throughout the years there have been over three hundred and forty different brands of balls available to players. Every company involved in the rubber industry manufactured tennis balls and most every chain store had its own in-house brand. Some examples are Macy's, Sears, Rexall Drugs, Firestone, Montgomery Wards, and Woolworths



My Experiences

When I first started collecting tennis balls, I had no idea how extensive my research would be. I could only name about six or so brands and now I have catalogued hundreds. I thought most cans would be plain and simple but have learned that manufacturers used to put quite a bit of thought and detail into their designs. I had never heard of the early 'flat top' cans nor the twelve ball containers.

Since creating a web site dedicated to my findings, I have been contacted by collectors, magazine editors, and other interested parties from all over the World.

I am a Lifetime Member of The United States Tennis Association.

I am a founding member of Tennis Collectors of America that was organized in 2003.

My Site: VintageTennisBalls.com

Tennis Collectors of America: tenniscollectors.org

The United States Tennis Association: usta.com

Twelve ball container from circa 1933 - 1945

