

Lew Hoad

During his quarter-century career as a professional, Pancho Gonzales faced a vast array of first-rate players and the one he considered the most devastating was Lewis Alan Hoad.

"When Lew's game was at its peak nobody could touch him," said Gonzalez, who cited Hoad as his toughest foe during his years of head-to-head one-night-stand pro tours.

Hoad who turned pro in 1957, after winning his second successive Wimbledon singles was one rookie who seemed able to dethrone Gonzalez as the pro king.

Jack Kramer, the 1947 Wimbledon champion and 1950s tour promoter, said: "Everybody loved Hoad, even Pancho Gonzalez. They should put that on Lew's tombstone as the ultimate praise for the man. Even when Hoad was clobbering Gonzalez, Gorgo wanted his respect and friendship."

They were just about even when Hoad's troublesome back – an injury he first sustained as a schoolboy playing Aussie Rules football – gave way during the winter of 1958.

Hoad won 18 of his first 27 matches, but in the 28th match of an electrifying series he stretched for a smash and collapsed in agony as lightning bolts of pain struck his lower back.

If the diagnosis sounded serious, sciatic neuritis, the prognosis was devastating. The condition was incurable. Still only 23, Hoad returned to the fray against Gonzalez and although Hoad lost 51 matches to 36, when the ache eased he was simply irresistible and Gonzalez felt threatened all the way.

It was Pancho's closest brush with defeat since he first took over leadership in 1954. In a 1995 *New York Times* interview, Gonzalez said: "He was the only guy who, if I was playing my best tennis, could still beat me.

"I think his game was the best game ever. Better than mine. He was capable of making more shots than anybody. His two volleys were great. His overhead was enormous. He had the most natural tennis mind with the most natural tennis physique."

The injury put Hoad into semi-retirement. In 1962 he went on tour with the new pro Rod Laver, who had just completed the Grand Slam. Laver won the first set of the first of their 13 best-of-five set

matches, after which he did not win another set. Hoad, half fit and seriously restricted in movement, imperiously swept through 39 sets in a row.

Hoad was a strapping five-foot eight inches, weighing in at 175lbs with a gorilla chest and iron wrists, known to some as "Muscles".

Jack Kramer, who promoted pro tours in the 1950s, compared Hoad to Ellsworth Vines in his 1979 autobiography saying: "Both were very strong guys. Vines lost his interest in tennis (for golf) before he was thirty, and Hoad never appeared to be very interested. Despite their great natural ability, neither put up the outstanding records they were capable of. Unfortunately, the latter was largely true because both had physical problems."

Hoad blistered the ball and became impatient with rallying, preferring to hit for winners. It was a flamboyant style and made for some bad errors when he wasn't in tune.

But when his power was focused along with his concentration, Hoad came on like a tidal wave. He was strong enough to use topspin as an offensive drive. He was assault minded, but had enough control to win the French title on slow clay in 1956.

Lew Hoad was born on 23rd November 1934, 21 days after 'twin' Ken Rosewall, at Glebe, New South Wales, Australia.

The right-handed Hoad was bracketed with Rosewall throughout his amateur days, although entirely different in stature, style, and personality, the two were called Australia's tennis twins, the prodigies who drew attention as teenagers and were rivals and team mates through 1956.

Hoad was stronger, but less patient and consistent, more easygoing. His back problems cut his career short in the mid-1960s while Rosewall, whose style was less taxing, kept on going into the next decade.

His countrymen fondly remember Hoad's Davis Cup triumph of 1953 over Tony Trabert on a rainy Melbourne afternoon. At 19, he and Rosewall had been selected to defend the Cup.

The United States led 2-1, in the finale and seemed about to clinch the Cup when the more experienced Trabert, already the U.S. champion, caught up at two sets all. Hoad hung on to win, however 13-11, 63, 3-6, 2-6, 7-5, and Rosewall beat Vic Seixas the following day to save the Cup 3-2.

Although they lost it to the Americans the next year, Hoad and Rosewall were awesome in 1955 retaking the prize 5-0; and defended the Davis Cup for the last time together in 1956.

Their first major titles came in 1953, when Lew and Ken were allied to win the Australian, French, and Wimbledon doubles.

They missed out on a Grand Slam on the last leg, the U.S. championships at Longwood, in a quarter-final upset by unseeded Americans Straight Clark and Hal Burrows 5-7, 14-12, 18-16, 9-7. But, taking 19 of 20 matches, he - playing left court - and Ken were the only male team other than countrymen Frank Sedgman - Ken McGregor in 1951-52 and; John Newcombe - Tony Roche in 1967 to win three of the four in one year.

Lew won 13 major titles in singles and doubles and in 1956 appeared on his way to win all four (Australian, French, Wimbledon and U.S.) singles within one year and thus achieve a rare Grand Slam.

His Wimbledon final-round victory over the omnipresent Rosewall meant he was three quarters of the way to a Slam. Yet it was Rosewall who stood as the immovable obstacle in the final at Forest Hills, spoiling a Slam with a 4-6, 6-2, 6-2, 6-3 triumph.

According to Kramer: "Hoad has the loosest game of any good kid I ever saw. There was absolutely no pattern to his name. He was the only player I ever saw who could stand six or seven feet behind the baseline and snap the ball back hard, crosscourt. He'd try for winners off everything, off great serves, off tricky short balls, off low volleys. He hit hard over-spin drives and there was no way you could ever get him to temporise on important points."

In his last significant tournament appearance in 1973, Lew reached the final of the South African doubles with Rob Maud, losing to Arthur Ashe and Tom Okker 6-2, 4-6, 6-2, 6-4. He lost the final of the U.S. Professional singles championships to Gonzalez in 1958 and 1959.

Despite losing out on a Grand Slam his 1956 season was a luminous hard-working campaign that netted 32 titles: 15 victories in 26 singles tournaments on a 95-11 match record, 17 victories in 23 doubles starts on 79-5. He had planned to turn professional after that but decided to go for the Slam again.

That dream ended almost immediately in Australian championship

semi-finals by Neale Fraser 7-5, 3-6, 6-1, 6-4. Then a lesser-known Aussie, Neil Gibson, lulled him to defeat in the third round of the French 2-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-4. Though Lew resolutely and smashingly did repeat at Wimbledon on the loss of one set, blasting Ashley Cooper in the final 6-2, 6-1, 6-2, he felt it was time to cash in. He accepted an offer from promoter Kramer and began preparing for Gonzalez.

For five straight years, beginning in 1952, he was in the world's Top Ten and the world's top amateur in 1956. Hoad's nemesis was the U.S. Championships in his five attempts and that of Bjorn Borg with 10 attempts are probably the two greatest players not to win the U.S. Open.

Lew married another player, countrywoman Jenny Staley (finalist in the 1954 Australian singles) and opened a tennis ranch in Fuengirola, Spain, near Malaga entertaining personal friends such as actors Sean Connery, Kirk Douglas and Charlton Heston.

During the final years of his life Hoad battled leukaemia and was waiting for a bone marrow donor when, in a weakened condition, he died of a heart attack on 3 July 1994 in Fuengirola, Spain, aged 59.

Grand Slam and Tournament Record

Australian: Singles 1956; Singles finalist 1955; Doubles 1953, 1956-1957; Doubles finalist 1956

French: Singles 1956; Doubles 1953; Doubles finalist 1954, 1956; Mixed 1954

Wimbledon: Singles 1956-1957; Doubles 1953, 1955-1956; Doubles finalist 1957

United States: Singles finalist 1955; Doubles 1956; Doubles finalist 1954; Mixed finalist 1952, 1956

Italian: Singles 1956; Singles finalist 1953; Doubles 1953, 1956-1957; Doubles finalist 1972

Davis Cup: Australia team member 1952-1956; winning side 1952-1953, 1955-1956; losing side 1954