

COMMUNITY

Career details

- Born in Norwich
- First played tennis at aged eight
- Current British rank: 4
- Highest British rank: 4
- Current world rank: 189
- Highest world rank: 176
- Norfolk county rank: 1
- Tennis triumphs include becoming National Junior Champion in 2001

A smashing Norfolk lad!

It's Tim Henman and Andy Murray who Hoover up the attention, the speculation and the adulation – but there is another young British hopeful at Wimbledon this year who grew up playing tennis in Lakenham.

Richard Bloomfield is the boy from tiny Alington, near Loddon, who will be taking his place at the greatest tennis tournament in the world on Monday.

"It's pretty special, being a British guy playing there," said 24-year-old Richard. "You get the crowd behind you and supporting you and wanting you to win."

Until last year, Richard's Wimbledon experience was limited to being knocked out twice in the first round. In 2005 he failed to qualify at all. And then in 2006 he scored a sensational first round victory against a player ranked 172 places above him.

However, the headlines were very soon less about a seedings upset than about allegations of a betting scandal. Argentinian Carlos Berlocq lost the match after more than £300,000 (10 times the expected amount for a match of this kind) had been staked on Bloomfield to triumph.

It was immediately stressed that Richard, who was bemused by the sudden eruption of attention, allegations and investigations, was innocent of any involvement. However, the flurry of claims and counter claims took some of the shine off a remarkable victory. No charges were ever brought and Richard went on to be eliminated from Wimbledon in straight sets in the second round.

For him the rumours of matches being thrown and fortunes being won were a minor irritation rather than a major scandal. "I didn't have much time to think about it because I had to play my next game, and I didn't hear anything afterwards," he said. True to form, he focused on his tennis.

The former Hobart High School pupil hopes to have a support crew of friends and family at Wimbledon, but he is a long way from the typical tennis brat with pushy parents choreographing his every move. A few mates from the Norfolk tennis scene will be at the core of the Bloomfield barmy army. "I suppose they might bring a Norwich City banner," said Richard.

"I'm sure my mum will come too," he added. "She used to take me to tournaments when I was younger".

However, his dad is more likely to stay at home in Alington and watch Wimbledon on the telly.

The Bloomfield family is far from being obsessed by tennis. Richard first picked up a racket at the age of eight after seeing his

A remarkable talent has taken Richard Bloomfield from a Norfolk village all the way to Wimbledon. **ROWAN MANTELL** talked to him about tennis, his dreams and being unknowingly caught up in a bizarre run of bets.

two older sisters playing. "They drifted away from it," he said. But Richard found himself getting better and better. "I started playing short tennis at junior school," he said. "I was into sport. I used to like playing and watching football and basketball too, but as I got

better at tennis I was invited to train more seriously."

He enjoys the individualism of tennis. "If you do well you've done it for yourself," he said. "On court you are on your own and it is down to you."

By the time he was a teenager Richard, left, knew he wanted to be a professional tennis player. Through school it was a hobby, but he was only a few months into his A level course at sixth form when he won the national junior

→ James Auckland, below, will also be playing at Wimbledon this year. The 27-year-old from Spixworth will be competing in his fifth Wimbledon – this time in the men's doubles championship, partnering Australian Stephen Huss. Last year James and then doubles partner Jamie Delgado won through to the third round before being knocked out.



championship and got the chance to turn professional.

"I got funding to go and play full-time," said Richard. It meant leaving home to join coach Peter Russell in Cheltenham and opened up a world of tournaments around the globe. Richard has played in Africa, America, Asia and Australia. It sounds glamorous, but there are downsides too – the constant travelling demanded by the professional tennis circuit can be very tiring, and Richard says that losing matches thousands of miles from home is particularly dispiriting. "Sometimes, if you lose early on in a tournament after travelling around the world it's a bit depressing," he said.

However, it is winning, rather than losing, that is on his mind as he gears up for Wimbledon.

Roger Federer is his role model player and Richard's fantasy match would be playing him on Centre Court.

"I think he's going to be the best player ever. I think he's

taken the game to a new level," said Richard.

It would take a leap of the imagination as big as Federer's serve to have Bloomfield winning Wimbledon, but the wildcard entry has topped another British tournament this year – winning the singles title in Bath in April.

And if he did lift that men's singles trophy and win the £700,000 prize? "I think I would spend it on a big house and all my Norfolk tennis mates would live there!" he said. "I'd give some to my family first though."

It was his parents who ferried him to and from coaching sessions and tournaments and who paid for the pricy gear as he clawed his way up the local and then the national rankings. They might not have been on court berating him for his backhand or slamming his serves; they might not be at every game playing every shot from the grandstand – but Richard is enormously grateful for their support, and knows they are pleased to see him doing so well.

When he comes home, Richard still plays tennis at the Lakenham Sports and Leisure Centre he started attending as child. "I have had some good times there," he said. "I grew up playing tennis there four or five times a week."

However, once Wimbledon is over he will have to start looking for a new Norwich tennis home because the sports centre is closing.

Richard is coached by Peter Russell at the East Gloucestershire Club in Cheltenham and spends much of his time working there when he is not playing in tournaments.

This year he joined Britain's Davis Cup team for the first time alongside Tim Henman, Greg Rusedski and the Murray brothers. "I remember playing Andy Murray when he was younger and I knew then that he had a particularly special return of serve," said Richard.

Tomorrow, Richard will discover who he has been drawn to play against in the first round of Wimbledon 2007. For Richard, a wild card entrant, it could be a daunting prospect. But his combination of natural talent and hunger to win is a match for many players and he is determined to claw his way further up the world rankings. He will also be playing in the doubles, partnering fellow Brit Jonathan Marray. For Wimbledon his philosophy is simple. "If you go on court feeling confident then you're already in a great position," he said.

→ Opinion – p8
→ Henman insists he is ready for Wimbledon – p110

