



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Visitors attempt a few volleys on the grass court of the All Iowa Lawn Tennis Club built on a family farm.

Iowa's little piece of Wimbledon

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Special to Tribune Newspapers

CHARLES CITY, Iowa — He built it, so they come.

Anyone driving down the gravel road through the cornfields of northern Iowa can't be blamed for stepping on the brakes and doing a double take. Just off the road, between a house and farm buildings, lies a little piece of England: a replica of Centre Court at Wimbledon, mecca in the world of lawn tennis.

For Mark Kuhn, building the court on his family's farm had been a dream since he was an 11-year-old doing chores on the cattle feedlot. It wasn't until he was in his 50s that Kuhn's "Field of Dreams" became reality on that same patch of land. Though never a movie set like the baseball field-turned-tourist attraction in Dyersville, Iowa, visitors nevertheless come to see the court and perhaps play a game or two. Kuhn welcomes them; no charge.

As a boy, Kuhn often made after-school visits to see his grandfather, who had retired from farming and moved into town. "He had this giant radio," Kuhn said. Together they tuned the shortwave to the BBC and listened to matches played at Wimbledon. A tennis fan was born, but one with a particular fascination for lawn tennis.

With the help of his wife, Denise, and two sons, Kuhn completed what he calls "a whimsical replica of Centre Court" in 2003 after 14 months of tough labor. Turf experts at Kuhn's alma mater, Iowa State University, discouraged him, saying the Iowa climate was unsuitable for a grass court, but seeing his determination, they offered advice. The feedlot was cleared, 17 truckloads of sandy soil were brought in, an irrigation system and drainage tiles installed.

A neighbor who saw the construction "thought we were building a hog confinement," Kuhn said. "When I told him what we were doing, he didn't believe me."

Court completed, Kuhn chris-



Creating a replica of Wimbledon's Centre Court began as a dream for Mark Kuhn at age 11, when he listened to matches from England via shortwave.

tened it the All Iowa Lawn Tennis Club and invited anyone to play. College and YMCA teams hold matches on it, a day camp uses it in summer, and visitors come from across the country to see it. One of fewer than 100 lawn courts in the nation — and certainly the only one in Iowa — it's a novelty.

Sometimes, Kuhn invites visitors into his screened porch to see his collection of wooden rackets, including the first he ever owned, bought by his mother with S&H Green Stamps. Anyone who arrives without a racket and wants to play gets a loaner.

The court's lawn is planted with bent grass, soft as a putting green. Kuhn cuts it every other day in four directions to give the court a checkerboard pattern. Lines are painted weekly, and an asphalt-

rolling machine smooths it flat when needed. Play on a lawn court is softer, easier on the knees, he said, and the ball has less bounce, especially when there's some moisture in the soil.

Kuhn has been to Wimbledon a few times and picked up tips from its groundskeepers and ideas for making his replica as authentic as possible. He uses a green and purple color scheme and built wooden net posts and a white umpire's chair. The court is surrounded by a wooden fence of 628 pickets he made with a jigsaw, painting them white on the outside, green inside.

A strawberry patch planted next to the court is handy for making Wimbledon's signature dish: strawberries and cream.

ctc-travel@tribune.com