

It's game, set – and matching separates

By Helen Nugent

TENNIS stars battling it out at this year's Wimbledon Championships will have some added competition on court – from the umpires, line judges and ball boys and girls.

But the Williams sisters and Rafael Nadal will be challenged only sartorially as match officials abandon their traditional green blazers in favour of Ralph Lauren slacks and tailored jackets.

The All England Club broke with 129 years of tradition yesterday and announced a five-year partnership with the epitome of upmarket sportswear, Polo Ralph Lauren.

Until now, the 335 umpires and line judges and 220 ball boys and girls have struggled with outfits that would make even the most athletic figure look lumpy and dowdy.

The uniforms are so unflattering that one umpire on her way to Wimbledon was approached in a supermarket and asked where the sausages were.

Now there is little chance of shoppers mistaking court officials for grocery assistants. This summer the beige trousers and flower-print dresses will be replaced by blue and white striped shirts and navy blue blazers trimmed with white that would not look out of place in *Vogue* or *Tatler*.

Lauren said yesterday: "I have long been inspired by the rich heritage and traditions of England. I am thrilled to be partnering with the All England Club, Wimbledon, and playing a major role in such a historic sporting event."

The All England Club guards its image jealously and is renowned for picking its commercial partners with care. Official suppliers range from Robinson's, which celebrated 70 years as the official still soft drink in 2005, to Rolex, which appears on the Centre Court and No 1 Court scoreboards as official timekeeper.

Details of the lucrative contracts are kept under wraps by the club, which would not say how much the Ralph Lauren partnership had cost.

The prices of the new outfits have yet to be revealed but they are likely to be in keeping with the high sums associated with Ralph Lauren clothing.

A Wimbledon collection will also be marketed by Ralph Lauren, including shorts for women, tank tops and pleated skirts. The crossed rackets logo associated with Wimbledon will be discreetly displayed on the range of clothes.

The All England Club has already achieved a successful international market. Sales in Japan make up a third of the club's £50 million merchandising revenue. It has become a worldwide brand; 20 Wimbledon retail shops have opened in China. The Japanese bought 300,000 pairs of Wimbledon shoes in 2004 and snapped up a grand slam computer game in which users play virtual-reality

matches in SW19 and which will soon be followed by a range of Wimbledon bicycles. The All England Club is confident that the new outfits will be appreciated by the officials who have to wear – and are allowed to keep – them.

Ian Ritchie, the chief executive of the club, said: "Wimbledon and Polo share the same

non-compromising standards and determination to maintain and enhance the values for which our two brands are famous throughout the world.

"The Polo brand will bring to Wimbledon the look of timeless elegance, drawing on our rich history and traditions."

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PAUL MARROTT/EMPICS



The "grocery assistant" outfit that officials have been wearing



The Ralph Lauren designs for Wimbledon's match officials

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