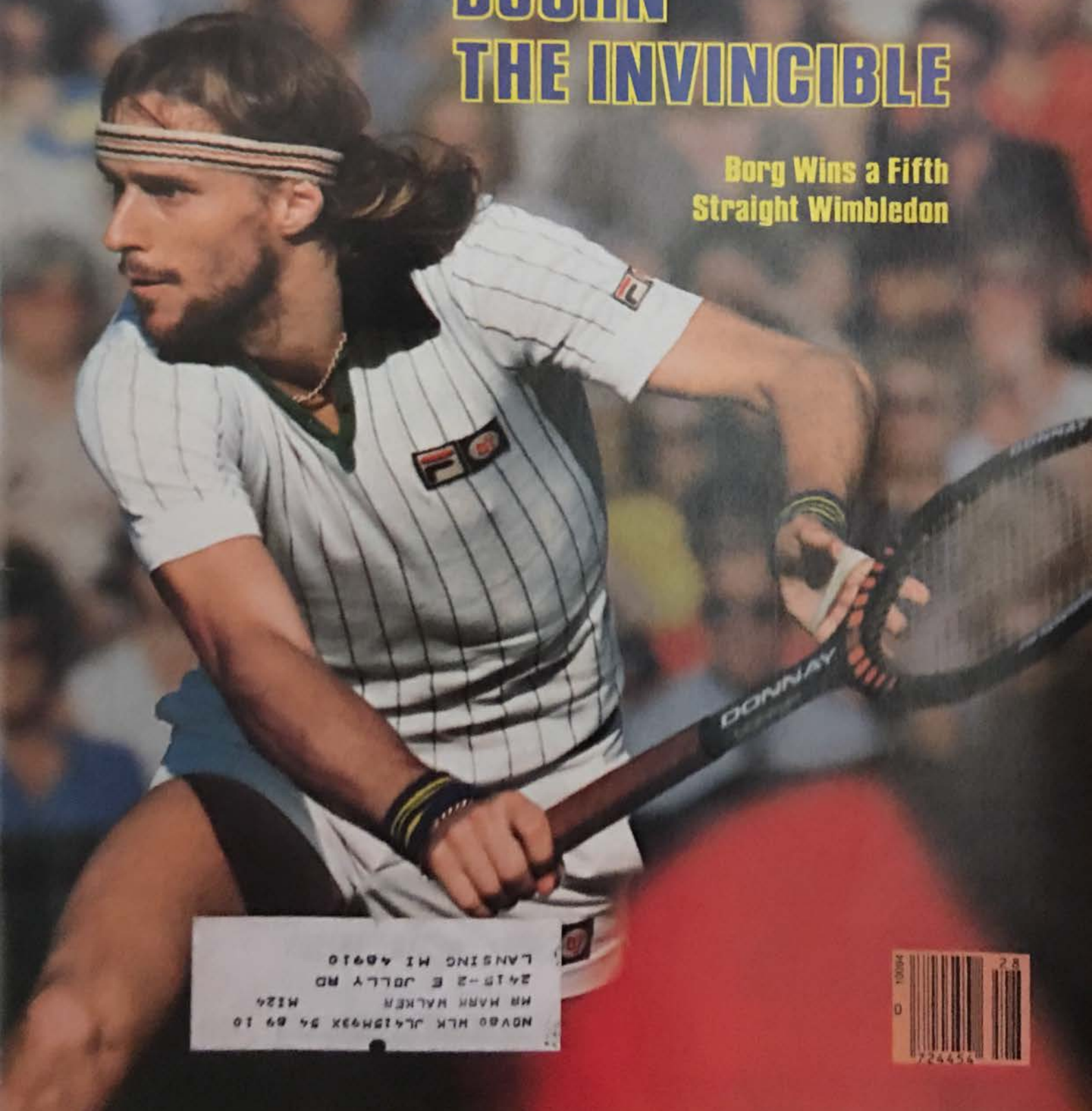


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BJORN THE INVINCIBLE

Borg Wins a Fifth
Straight Wimbledon



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Robert Waldorf Loveless, 51, is standing before a polishing wheel, buffing the blade of a hunting knife. It is midnight. On the radio, Bessie Smith wails *Empty Bed Blues*. Loveless, a big man with a voice to match, has been working for 12 hours. He's wearing jeans, a workshirt embroidered with Japanese characters, a Rolex watch and a cocked, locked and loaded .45 automatic Colt Commander pistol. A gaily striped cap—a facsimile of the pre-World War II Japanese Army summer forage model—covers his graying hair.

Loveless holds up the shimmering knife for inspection, flipping a set of homemade 7-power magnifying lenses over his safety glasses. His huge hands are covered with calluses, cuts, steel grit and grease, but he holds the seven-ounce object as comfortably as a surgeon holds a scalpel. His eyes travel over his handiwork, centimeter by magnified centimeter. Sighting down the cutting edge, he roars suddenly at the ceiling, "God, Loveless, you sure as hell have a lot to learn about making knives!"

The experts don't agree with him. In the opinion of hunters, guides, collectors and fellow bladesmen, Loveless is the best knifemaker in the world. And they proclaim their praise with reverence. Gene Hill, hunter and outdoors author: "A Loveless knife is like a Purdy shotgun—classic, elegant and unsurpassed." Ed Weinberger, friend, outdoorsman and collector: "No knife has the density, the feel of a Loveless. It's a work of art, and it's an extension of your arm." A.G. Russell, knifemaker, honorary president of the Knifemakers' Guild and custom-knife broker: "You can say that this knifemaker's grinding is better than Bob's, or that that one's polishing is better. But overall, he makes the best handmade knife in the modern world. When you hold a Loveless, you know that it's something very, very special."

Loveless fighting knives hang on the belts of many army staff officers around the free world, are used by Special Forces A teams and find their way into the boots of CIA operatives. His hunting knives are worked hard by Montana cowboys, Texas guides and Alaskan trappers.

But a substantial number of Loveless blades lie in the dustproof velvet cases of the collectors, who don white gloves before touching them lest a fingerprint mar their perfection. And that is a fact that pains the master.

In the booming custom-knife-collecting market, Loveless blades are almost worth their weight in gold. Over the past few years, several Loveless knives have sold for \$3,000. Lovelesses are so much in demand that their maker is five years behind in filling the orders that pour into his shop. A few months ago he stopped taking orders altogether, sending the collectors into the kind of frenzied bidding that attends the death of a famous painter.

To those of us who buy a \$15 sheath knife in a hardware store, it's difficult to understand what makes a hunting knife worth \$3,000. It is a question that bothers Loveless as much as anyone.

The master of the cutting edge lives on the outskirts of Riverside, Calif., 60 miles and light-years southeast of Beverly Hills. Here pickup trucks pick up bales of hay and bags of seed instead of Bo Derek imitators. The pastel paint on the clapboard houses is washed out and peeling. The sign on the local liquor store is made of bare light bulbs, and across the road from Loveless' small decaying yellow house, a mongrel dog chained to a stained bathtub in a front yard yaps endlessly.

Now Loveless is having dinner in his tiny kitchen at one of those long Formica-topped tables folks rent for backyard wedding receptions. Before him are his .45 on top of a volume of Ansel Adams nature photographs, a television with a five-inch screen tuned to the news, a book called *The Rich and the Super-rich* and a Braun lighter that is included in the Museum of Modern Art's design collection. On a cracked plastic plate are a filet mignon and an Oriental noodle dish prepared by Loveless' Japanese wife, Yoshiko. It is a mad collage: East meets West, gun advocate vs. environmentalist, the meticulous artist vs. the patently shabby.

Loveless is given to sudden philosophical outbursts. Furiously gumming his steak—he has *continued*

ON THE CUTTING EDGE

Bob Loveless lives a life of apparent contradictions, not the least of which is that the handmade knives he fashions so beautifully are avidly sought by collectors he likes not at all *by J.D. REED*



two sets of false teeth but they irritate him, so he usually wears neither—he blurts out, "Our lives are mired in detritus. Objects own us; they keep us from our creativity. The kind of American who acquires a lot of expensive things so that he can show them off to his peer group and thereby acquire more status is the kind of American that makes me puke."

"Why would anyone pay \$3,000 for a hunting knife? They say, because my name is on it. I'm carrying an awful big rep. If I were a gunfighter, I'd be hiding in a cave somewhere. But I wouldn't spend that much money for a knife if it were autographed by Jesus Christ himself!"

To underscore his point, Loveless brandishes his steak knife. It's one of those serrated-blade jobs with a plastic handle, the kind they advertise on late-night television. "This does the job," he growls.

But in the modern, orderly cinder-block shop behind the house, a set of 12 Loveless steak knives is being ground for a Connecticut art dealer. The price: \$1,500. Such are the vagaries of a free-market economy, Loveless will tell you. And unlike the \$2.98 variety he wields

over his dinner, the Loveless knives will long outlast their owner. Two centuries from now they should still be slicing beef.

There are more than 250 registered custom knifemakers in the country, many of them ranchers, engineers or outdoorsmen who make only a few knives each year as a hobby. There are perhaps 30 full-timers like Loveless who make a living at their craft. Knifemaking boomed in the late '60s, when the collectibles mania caught hold of otherwise normal folks, who began amassing everything from glass powerline insulators to cork beer coasters. The demands of knife collectors and speculators have driven the makers in a direction that Loveless hates.

When he conceived and co-founded the Knifemakers' Guild in 1970, he had no idea what the result would be. "We were suddenly 'discovered,'" he says, "and the shame of it was that the collectors drove the prices sky-high. Hell, a working cowboy, a hunter, even a guide, has a tough time affording my knives now."

Loveless separates handmade knives into two groups: "using" knives and "wall-hangers." He proudly makes the former variety; while many of the finest



PHOTOGRAPH BY LANE STEWART

Loveless puts the finishing touch on a new knife ground from a bar of his stainless toolsteel.

crafted, Loveless shakes his head. "I'm probably a damn fool, but the customers ordered in good faith and sent in deposits. I can't ask them to pay the current tab."

Loveless also shares some of the blame for the backlog. He made only 75 knives in 1979 because he wasn't in the mood—knifemaker's block, as it were. Masters are like that. But it is not only that he can't afford an assistant; he probably doesn't want one. He doesn't make friends easily; he prefers standing bow-legged at his grinding wheel late at night, listening to blues and jazz, alone with his craft. He's a loner.

Occasionally Loveless lowers his tired bulk onto a shop stool, pours coffee into a tin mug and considers his knives. He picks one up and slides the blade sideways over his thumb. If it isn't perfectly sharpened, the blade will slide off. He gently pokes the point into a big callus in his palm to test it. And he speaks in low purring tones of his craft.

"When a man picks up a knife, there's an old memory from the collective unconscious that surfaces. A knife is an atavistic experience. It was man's first tool and weapon. Man was chip-

craftsmen turn out absurd-sized Bowies, scrimshawed push-daggers and elaborately engraved commemoratives for the outrageous prices that collectors are willing to pay. Loveless refuses to cater to that market.

"The test that separates a working knife from a toy is the pelvic joint of a buck mule deer," Loveless says. "You use one of those big, pretty Bowies that's been made for a museum, and the damn blade will snap off or get so dull that it won't cut the other hip. What's the point of a new knife in a museum or a cabinet? That's for history to decide, not the knifemaker."

For all his railing against the hoarding of objects, Loveless has an insatiable lust for calculators, cameras, watches, pistols, tape recorders, pens and miniature television sets. They are arrayed by the dozens in orderly fashion in his seven-room shop. Loveless is also a compulsive tinkerer, never satisfied with these and other objects as they are. "If I pick up a hammer to build a house, I'll start thinking about how I can improve the tool," he says. "I won't get the house built, but I'll end up with one hell of a fine hammer."

Despite the discount-store aspect of Loveless' shop, most of it, including

\$100,000 worth of machine tools, is devoted to knifemaking. Like most modern knifemakers, Loveless uses the stock-reduction method of making blades, in which the knife begins as a bar of 1/2-inch-thick stainless steel and is ground away and shaped by motor-driven grinding belts of successively finer grits into a finished knife. It's a long, dirty process, though a matter of fine touch, and after a day in the shop, Loveless, his skin gray with steel dust, often looks as if he's come up from a coal mine.

There are a few men, like Bill Moran in Maryland, who hand-forged blades by the old Damascus method, heating metal and pounding it into shape on an anvil, building layers of steel and soft iron into a usable blade. But Loveless, firmly committed to high-tensile stainless, says, "Forging is an interesting exercise in history, but I want a stronger blade when I go into the woods."

Although his shop seems roomy enough for an apprentice or two, who could help Loveless catch up on his five-year backlog, he claims he can't afford such assistance, even though the average price of his knives has risen to \$600 and he could turn out 20 knives a month if he pushed. But Loveless honors the prices in effect when customers placed

their orders. Thus, a simple four-inch knife that has a current market value of \$600 may have been selling for \$200 in 1975 when Loveless took the order, and that's the price at which it will be de-



Fuyuhiko sees that her husband is properly dressed on trips to Japan, where he is regarded as a master.



Among the things Loveless loves are Oriental food, miniature televisions and his trusty .45 pistol.



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