

The New York Times

A Cinderella Story at Wimbledon,

By NAILA-JEAN MEYERS

JULY 12, 2016

LONDON — I was late for the ball.

O.K., it wasn't a ball, exactly, it just felt that way as I stood in a locker room at the All England Club trying on gowns.

I had received a last-minute news media invitation for Sunday night's Wimbledon champions dinner, a black-tie party on the last night of the tournament. At 139, Wimbledon is the oldest of the Grand Slam events, and the most committed to pageantry and tradition. The champions dinner has been held since 1977.

I was woefully underdressed for the occasion, having shown up for work Sunday afternoon in beige capri pants, a J. Crew T-shirt and sneakers, carrying an overstuffed red backpack. I had, in fact, not brought anything to England that was suitable for this occasion.

I wasn't alone. Many of the players who had won titles over the weekend did not have formal wear handy, either. At a news conference after winning the junior boys' singles championship, Denis Shapovalov was asked if he knew the arrangements for the party since "you're not supposed to wear what you have on right now," which was Nike athletic wear.

"Yeah, I'm going to go get suited," he said.

Being underdressed for tennis prom is not a problem at the All England Club. Just go to the locker room, I was told, and they'll set you up. Sure enough, there were racks of gowns, rows of high-heeled shoes and a pile of accessories like clutches, bracelets and earrings. A woman was doing hair and makeup nearby.



Serena Williams, who won the women's singles title at Wimbledon, at the champions dinner in London on Sunday

The locker-room operation was being run by a group of women from Having a Ball Dress Hire, who had been doing this for years. It took them about five minutes to discern the proper dress for me. It was a midi-length red lace dress in 1950s A-line style, paired with nude pumps. It may have been my favorite outfit I've ever put on.

I still had work to do, so my assembled ensemble was set aside, and I was told to come back in an hour to get it. When I came back, my dress was gone. In the hubbub of dressing so many players and their guests, my dress bag had disappeared. The women in the locker room could not find it and did not know who had taken it. Oh, what a hardship: I would have to try on more gowns. The problem then was that it was 8:30 — the time when the dinner, 10 miles away at Guildhall in London, was supposed to start.

A new dress was found in short order: a floor-length black dress with beaded cap sleeves. There was only one pair of shoes left in my size, but luckily they were black and sort of fit. I finally headed to the dinner around 9:30, but by the time I got to Guildhall, after some wrong turns and road closures, it was about 10:45. I glamorously rushed up the red carpet wearing a raincoat over my dress, still hauling that overstuffed backpack, but the gathered photographers had no interest in me.

When I got to the door of the dining room, the gatekeepers could not find my name on the list. I stood awkwardly outside the hall, at one point holding the door open for Ivan Lendl and part of Andy Murray's entourage. Still unable to find my name, they sat me at an empty table in the back of the hall. I was at the losers' table. But, hey, at least I had beaten Murray there. He made his entrance about 15 minutes after I did, posed for pictures with his trophy and went on his way to one of the V.I.P. tables in the front of the hall. I had arrived just before the main course. When it showed up, I was still sitting alone at a table. But the wait staff still dutifully set 12 plates of halibut on the table.

"Are they all for me?" I joked.

"Yes, madam," one of the servers said with a smile, playing along. I shrugged and went about eating the halibut — just my plate — but I must have looked pathetic, because an official-looking woman with a headset finally sat down next to me to figure out what had gone amiss. At this point, I was halfway through my halibut with truffle mash, asparagus and Champagne foam.

It turned out there had been a seat with my name card on it at the next table with other journalists. When I arrived at my new table, there was an untouched plate of halibut with truffle mash, asparagus and Champagne foam at my seat, so I ate that one, too. I'd missed a course, after all.

Eventually, around midnight, it came time for the speeches. Philip Brook, the Wimbledon chairman, recapped the two-week tournament and introduced all the champions before ceding the stage to Murray and Serena Williams. They answered some questions from the newscaster Trevor McDonald, the evening's M.C., and posed for more pictures with their trophies.

Shortly afterward, the party broke up. In the cloakroom, I joined several other women in collecting our matching pink "Having a Ball" dress bags. Everything I was wearing would have to be returned on Monday.

The clock had struck midnight, and my time as Cinderella was done.

I didn't see anyone at the party in my missing red lace dress.



Andy Murray, the Wimbledon men's singles champion, with his wife, Kim, at the champions dinner. Credit Pool photo by Karwai Ta