Wimbledon has discarded another of its many traditions: The towel police are history.

After years of discouraging players from taking tournament towels, officials at the All England Club now mostly shrug as competitors stuff their racket bags with what has become the most coveted keepsake from the championships.

"We’d like to see as many of them returned as possible, but it’s not the end of the world if we don’t," said Johnny Perkins, a spokesman for the club. "There are bigger things to be worrying about."

This is the 25th year of the commemorative Wimbledon towel made by Christy, a company founded in England that once made towels for Queen Victoria. It was bought by Welspun India Ltd. in 2006.

This year, Christy produced 99,500 Wimbledon towels, of various sizes, most of which are sold to the public. Sales have increased 46% since 2008, the company says; next year, Wimbledon towels will be sold in India for the first time. Towels like the players use retail for £28, or about $44.

Christy sets aside 6,000 of the colorful towels for Wimbledon players, who are given two during each match. Robert Walker, CEO of Welspun UK Ltd., said about 60% of those 6,000 towels vanish by the end of the tournament.

"The one thing I want," Walker said, "is more towels, more demand, more sales."

Wimbledon don’t sell leftovers, though Mr. Walker said some of his employees are all too glad to receive a towel once used by a top player. "We just don’t want to run a shortage at the tournament," he said.

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304211804577501032577828636.html
The towels have become a popular souvenir. Novak Djokovic, the defending Wimbledon champion, keeps a stockpile. "Wimbledon is the most recognizable tennis tournament in the world," Mr. Djokovic said. "And the colors are nice."

Roger Federer, the sport's richest man and a six-time Wimbledon champion, said, "I only keep about two a tournament and I give the rest away."

Some players are besieged with requests for towels from friends and family. "They want towels—they don't want T-shirts, they don't want caps," said Akgul Amanmuradova, who says she lugs towels home to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. "Even rich people, you would think, 'Why do they need this towel, they have everything?' But they are so happy when you bring it to them."

For most players, opportunities to take towels are rare. Michael Russell, a 34-year-old American, has played Wimbledon six times. He won a match this year, only his second ever at Wimbledon. He appreciates Wimbledon's towel détente.

"One year the ball kids went into my bag and took out the towels," Mr. Russell said. "I played doubles the next day and they went to get them again and I got upset. I was like, 'Hey, that's the one thing I want to take away from here!'"

These days, Mr. Russell said, he never has a problem. "They let you take them," he said. He collected six this year in his three matches (two in singles and one in doubles). "It's a good towel year," he said.

There are two Wimbledon towels for players. The one given to male players is purple and green with tennis balls and letters in a color called "buttermilk." The women's towel is done up in new colors each year; this year's version is raspberry, purple and buttermilk. Christy redesigns the towel every few years; for 2012, the company performed major renovations. The job fell to Lucy Ackroyd.

"In the past, the towels had a novelty look, like a stylized image of a racket or a net," Ms. Ackroyd said. "The club thought that was looking a bit tired and wanted something more contemporary, upmarket and elegant."

Ms. Ackroyd offered 30 designs before the All England Club settled on a simple version with tennis balls and a cleaner font. The towels always display the Christy name along the bottom. That confuses some people.

"We have had the odd person who has asked, 'Can I put my name on it?' " said Jean Cooke, the tournament's retail director. (Shopping tip: Wimbledon will embroider one's initials on a towel for an extra £5, but only for online purchases.)

The tennis tour's towel collector-in-chief is Tamarine Tanasugarn, the 35-year-old veteran who competed in her 16th Wimbledon this year. (She lost in the first round.) Ms. Tanasugarn keeps her towels on a shelf in her home in Bangkok.

"I was telling my mom I might hang them on the wall," she said. "But I'm not sure which way." She's considering framing them.

Towel lovers rejoice when it rains. "The delays are awesome because you go back in the locker room and you can get fresh ones," said U.S. doubles star Bob Bryan.

Ivo Karlovic, the 6-foot-10 Croatian who was defeated in the second round by Mr. Murray, took five towels during his rain-delayed first-round match. He uses them at home in Miami. "Every morning in the shower, after practice," he said. "They work well."

The players' towels are extra absorbent. Christy doesn't use fabric softener when producing them; the ones sold in the Wimbledon shop and online are slightly softer. Otherwise, the towels are identical.

Players save towels from the other Grand Slam tournaments, too, but not as compulsively. Mr. Russell covets his lone U.S. Open towel because it is rare for a player of his rank—the U.S. Open only gives out official towels for matches on television courts. He got one when he played Andy Roddick in Arthur Ashe Stadium last year. "On the smaller courts you get a white, grungy towel," Mr. Russell said.
The biggest fan of the 2012 Wimbledon towel isn't a tennis player, though. "My mother has this theory that the first year of my towel, Andy Murray will win the tournament," said Ms. Ackroyd, the designer. Mr. Murray is still in the tournament, which ends Sunday. "She's more excited than I am."

* A version of this article appeared July 5, 2012, on page A1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Wimbledon Throws in the Towel On Trying to Keep Them.  

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