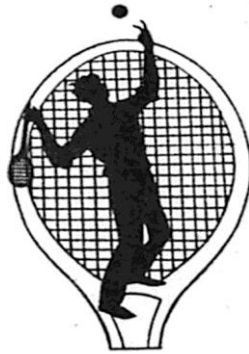


125th Anniversary of Tennis at Travers Island

by Mark W. Gaffney



In 2013, the 125th Anniversary season for Travers Island at the New York Athletic Club, tennis flourishes both as a competitive and a recreational athletic activity.

First Tennis Courts in 1888

Tennis holds the distinction within the Club of having the first athletic facilities in use at Travers Island in 1888. When a procession of 300 members arrived by chartered train from Grand Central Terminal to take festive possession of Travers Island on June 10, 1888, the Athletic Field and Boat House remained under construction. Yet by then the first two grass tennis courts were in use on the former site of an apple orchard and dog kennel in front of the former home of Arthur Hunter on the site of the present Tennis House. The Athletic Field and Boat House were completed for the first Fall Games at Travers Island in September 1888, and a tennis championship was held with those Fall Games. The first tennis championship at Travers Island was won by Robert Dunning, who also became the Club's first Tennis Committee Chairman. Two clay tennis courts were added at Travers Island in 1892. Other early Tennis Committee Chairmen, who also represented the Club in tennis competition, were William Gillett, Ralph Hickox, Harold Hackett, and Rufus Davis. Harold Hackett set the stage for competitive tennis at the NYAC by winning the national doubles championship from 1907–10, and serving as Player-Captain of the U.S. Davis Cup team in 1908, 1909, and 1913.

After the current Travers Island Club House was built in 1908, four additional clay courts were added in 1909, bringing the total to eight, then deemed a sufficient number for both competitive and recreational tennis. The courts were rotated from east-west alignment to north-south in 1909, equalizing the handicap of overabundant sunlight to players on either side of the court. The first Tennis Instructor at Travers Island was William F. Ganley, serving for several seasons until usage of Travers Island slackened during World War I. When Ganley left, his temporary replacement as Tennis Instructor was the Club's legendary sprinter and track coach, Bernie Wefers. An annual handicapped tennis tournament at Travers Island in those early years promoted spirited competition between players at different levels of ability.

Tennis House Opened in 1916



The Tennis House overlooking the tennis courts at Travers Island opened in 1916. Its attractive design was adapted from the design of the Trap Shooters' House at the west end of Travers Island, which opened in 1908. The same design was also used in 1916 for the Yacht House at the east end of Travers Island. Together, they form a trio of miniature versions of the Travers Island Club House in white stucco with red trim, centered by a stone fireplace.

Tennis Revival After World War I

939 NYAC members served in the allied military forces in World War I, out of a total membership of about 6,000. The depleting effect of the war effort on the Club's athletic programs, including tennis, was much higher however than the ratio of 939 to 6,000, as athletics depended on the same youth and vitality as the military. After the war, tennis at the NYAC revived resoundingly. In 1921, Tennis Committee Chairman (later Club Vice President) Henry Wilson offered a Travers Island Challenge Cup to the winner of the annual Club Tennis Championship, to become the permanent possession of the first member winning it three times. The first winners of the Travers Island Challenge Cup in 1921 and 1922, respectively, were Walter Merrill Hall (later President of the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association and Chairman of the U.S. Davis Cup Committee) and Dr. George King (team doctor for the New York Yankees). From the early 1920's to the late 1930's, Rowland Dufton served as an instructor for both tennis and squash. Dufton converted the eight tennis courts from yellow clay to red clay, and later to red brick dust. Dufton's assistant squash instructor in the late 1920's was Tommy Byrne, until he was hired away as squash instructor at the Downtown Athletic Club.

M.F. Loughman, NYAC President (1922-23), a tennis and squash enthusiast, offered a second Travers Island Challenge Cup, also to become the permanent possession of the next member winning it three times. NYAC Captain Arthur McAleenan later offered a third Travers Island Challenge Cup, on similar terms. Herbert Bowman, known nationally as "the gentleman tennis player", began to play tennis at Travers Island around 1920, and won all three aforementioned Travers Island Challenge Cups, by winning the Club Championship nine times. Bowman also won the New York State Men's Singles title three times, the New Jersey title five times, the Bermuda title five times, the Eastern Clay Court Championship (at Travers Island in 1927, 1929, and 1930) three times, and the Tribune Bowl three times. Bowman won more titles than any other tennis player in the AAU's Metropolitan District between the early 1920's and the early 1940's.

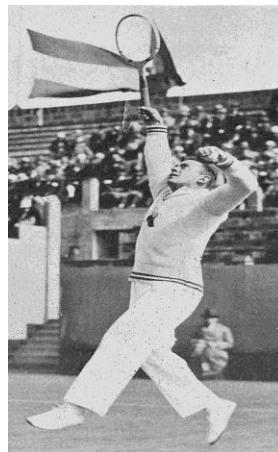


Herbert Bowman, one of the N. Y. A. C. tennis stars, and some of the trophies he has won in recent years on the courts.

The 1920's were the high-water mark for competitive tennis at the NYAC. Vinnie Richards, the "Boy Wonder" from Fordham Prep who won the National Boy's Outdoor Singles Championship in 1917 and 1918, represented the NYAC in competition. Frank Hunter, Captain of the tennis and hockey teams at Cornell University, began to compete for the NYAC in the early 1920's. After Richards and the incomparable Bill Tilden won several National Indoor and Outdoor Men's Doubles Championships in the early 1920's, Richards next teamed up with Hunter. Richards and Hunter won the National Men's Indoor Doubles Championship in 1923 and 1924, and achieved tennis immortality by winning the Gold Medal at the VIII Olympiad in Paris. Richards also won the 1924 Olympic Gold Medal in Men's Singles Tennis, and the 1924 Olympic Silver Medal in Mixed Doubles Tennis with Mrs. Marian Jessup. Richards represented the U.S. in the Davis Cup from 1922 until 1926 when he turned professional. Richards won the championship of the Professional Lawn Tennis Association in 1927, 1928, 1930, and 1933.



VINCENT RICHARDS



Olympic Champion Doubles Partners Vinnie Richards and Frank Hunter

When Richards turned professional, Hunter became doubles partner with Tilden. Hunter and Tilden made an exhibition tour of Europe in 1927, successfully competing for the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association against the best players in Ireland, England, Holland, Belgium, France and Germany, winning the titles in all nations except for a defeat to France's Rene Lacoste and Jean Borotra. Hunter wore the Winged Foot emblem of the NYAC on his tennis sweater throughout the 1927 European tour. Hunter represented the U.S. in Davis Cup competition from 1927 through 1930, turning professional with Tilden in 1931. Tilden won the Eastern Clay Court Championship at Travers Island in 1925, and Hunter won it at Travers Island in 1926.

Richards was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1959 and both Hunter and Hackett were inducted in 1961.

Tennis Revival After World War II

1200 NYAC members served in the allied military forces in World War II, fully 20 percent of the membership. Further, the tennis courts at Travers Island were off limits to NYAC members from 1943 to 1945, as Travers Island was leased to the U.S. Navy as home of the Royal Norwegian Navy Gunnery School. For those years, the NYAC reached an accommodation with the Gracie Park Tennis Club on the East River in Manhattan, allowing NYAC members to play tennis there while Travers Island was at war.

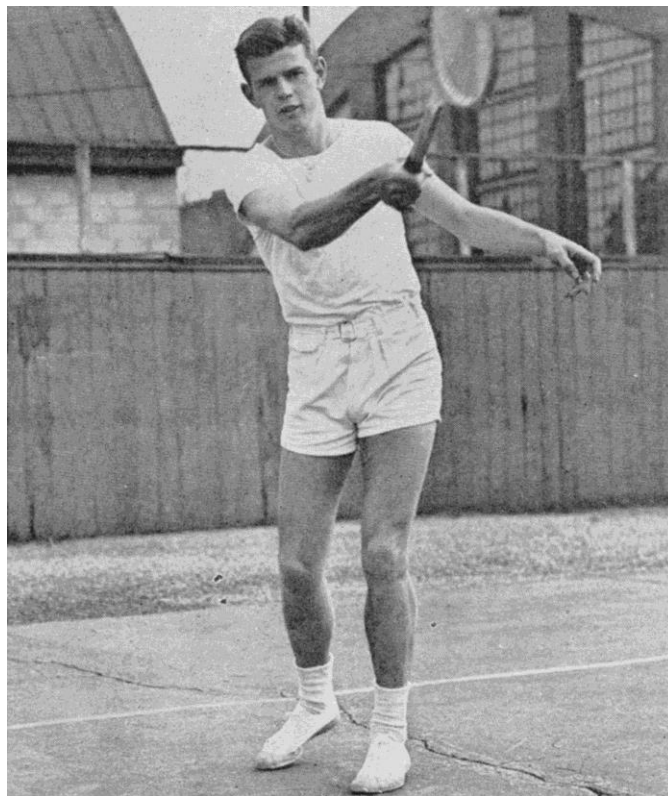
By the time of the post-war era, professional tennis had eclipsed amateur tennis as a competitive sport. Thus, in the post-war years the NYAC as an amateur athletic organization did not continue the dominance of the sport that it enjoyed in the 1920's. Nevertheless, several important steps at the NYAC produced outstanding accomplishments in tennis the post-war years.

First, the NYAC persuaded the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association to bring the Eastern Clay Courts Championship back to Travers Island in 1948, after an absence of 18 years. In the 1948 Eastern Clay Court Championships at Travers Island, top-seeded U.S. amateur Frank Parker defeated second-seeded Billy Talbert of the NYAC in a closely-contested match. Talbert won the 1949 Eastern Clay Court Championships at Travers Island.

Second, the NYAC assembled a Committee for the 1948 Eastern Clay Court Championships like none before. The Tennis Committee Chairman was Charles Birdsall. The Tournament Director was Bill Fallon. The Honorary Chairman of the event was 1924 Olympic Tennis Champion Vinnie Richards, by then a widower living at the NYAC City House. The Chief Umpire for the event was Herb Bowman. Though well past their prime as tennis players, Richards and Bowman in the 1940's and 1950's continued their generous support of the NYAC tennis program.

Third, Tommy Byrne came to Travers Island as Tennis Instructor in 1950. Byrne had replaced Rowland Dufton as NYAC Squash Instructor in the late 1930's. Byrne stayed on in the dual role of Squash and Tennis Instructor at the NYAC until the mid-1970's, a role in which he was a living legend for generations of NYAC squash and tennis players.

Fourth, the NYAC recruited fresh tennis talent in 1948. Among the 1948 recruits was the Captain of the Notre Dame tennis team that won the NCAA championship in 1944, Bill Tully. Sponsored for membership by Vinnie Richards, Tully was the 1948 Club Champion at Travers Island, defeating the highly-ranked fellow member Zan Carver. Tully was Club Champion nine times; 1948, 1949, 1951, 1953, 1961, 1963, 1971, 1975, and 1977. Tully won the Canadian Open in 1948, the New York State tennis title in 1954 and 1959, and the Westchester County tennis title nine consecutive times in the 1950's. In 1953, Tully won the NYAC Veterans Association (since renamed the Quarter Century Club) Annual Athletic Progress Award. Tully played in 17 consecutive U.S. Open Tennis Tournaments, starting at age 16. In later years, Tully won many seniors' tennis titles and doubles tournaments, often teaming with one of his nine children or 17 grandchildren, each of whom had their father or grandfather as tennis mentor. Tully represented the U.S. in court tennis as a demonstration sport at the Olympic Games in Mexico in 1968.



Bill Tully, Captain of Notre Dame's National Champion Tennis Team

Fifth, the NYAC Tennis Club was started in 1948, to augment tennis play with an intra-club devoted to organizing social events for tennis players and their families. The NYAC Tennis Club later became the Racquets Club. While the Racquets Club is no longer in existence, its tradition of regular social events for the NYAC tennis community continues as part of the activities of the Tennis Committee.

Last but not least, the tennis program expanded to include spouses and children of members. This expansion began during the economic slump of the 1930's, to increase usage of the tennis facilities. A dressing room with showers for ladies was introduced at Travers Island in 1936. Due to the great participation in ladies' tennis and in junior tennis programs in subsequent years, the extension of tennis privileges to spouses and children of members can only be seen as an important step forward.

Tennis for Spouses and Children of Members



Tennis Committee Chairmen since the 1950's have continued to work with the Travers Island management staff, and the officers and other committees of the NYAC, in growing a successful tennis program at Travers Island. The tennis program has tournaments for all levels of play in singles and doubles for men, ladies, and juniors, and inter-club league play for men, ladies, and juniors, and instructional programs, and opportunities for tennis at the recreational level. The highlight of each tennis season at Travers Island is the Tennis Awards Dinner, when prizes for the numerous tournaments are distributed. At the Junior Tennis Awards Dinner in August 1971, 15-year-old "America's Sweetheart" Chris Evert (on her way toward nationwide celebrity) distributed the awards, as she and her mother were guests at the Tully family home in Pelham Manor during her first appearance at the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament. Chris' father Jimmy Evert was Bill Tully's tennis teammate and dormitory roommate at Notre Dame.

Chris Evert Distributes Prizes at 1971 Junior Tennis Awards Dinner



Tennis Facilities Expanded in 1970's and Beyond



John Menna, Tennis Chairman, and Joe Ingrassia, Athletic Chairman, flank ribbon-cutter Vice-President Dick Long as members of the Lawn Tennis Committee assist with the happy duty.

By the 1970's, the tennis facilities at Travers Island were due for refurbishment and expansion. The Tennis and Travers Island Committees of the 1970's supervised the conversion of the first eight courts from red clay to green clay, and the construction of ten additional green clay courts, as part of the completion of the landscaping of Travers Island. The Tennis Snack Bar behind the Tennis House opened in 1974. In addition, platform tennis courts and a platform tennis hut were opened in the 1972. Platform Tennis as a winter sport complementing tennis as a summer sport made for year-round tennis play at Travers Island. In the 1990's, three of the 18 tennis courts were converted to an all-weather Deco-Turf surface, and provided lights for year-round evening play. In 2011, the Tennis House underwent a thorough renovation. In 2012, the eight "upper" Har-Tru tennis courts were refurbished as "hydro" courts, with an automated underground irrigation system.

The 1980's and early 1990's was an era dominated by a spirited rivalry between perennial Club Tennis Champions Rusty Wright and Danny Mastrangelo. Wright, a graduate of Jacksonville University, was Club Tennis Champion a record ten times between 1982 and 1997, while Mastrangelo, a product of the Club's Junior Tennis Program, was Club Tennis Champion three times between 1983 and 1994.



Perennial Club Tennis Champions Danny Mastrangelo and Rusty Wright

Junior Tennis Academy Opened in 1990's

A noteworthy innovation in the Tennis Program in the 1990's was the introduction of the Junior Tennis Academy. No longer reserved to a small group of hand-picked youngsters, the Junior Tennis Academy under Tennis Instructor Marty Smith and his staff of professionals teaches tennis fundamentals to dozens of children in all age brackets and all levels of play. Tennis is also one of the elective activities in the Winged Foot Day Camp each summer. When school is out during summer vacation, the tennis facilities on weekdays receive heavy usage by the ladies and the juniors. Many recent products of the Junior Tennis Academy have gone on to play competitive tennis at the college level and beyond, and occupy the top rungs of the competitive tennis ladder on display at the Tennis House.

Jim Moore and Marty Moore, sibling grandsons of Billy Tully, were outstanding products of the Junior Tennis Academy of the 1990's. Both were nationally-ranked Juniors in the 1990's who won the Eastern Tennis Association Junior Boys Sportsmanship Award. Both have been members of the NYAC since 2000 and both played varsity singles and doubles tennis at Columbia University, Jim being Team Captain for the Class of 2006, and Marty being Team Captain for the Class of 2007. Jim has been Club Tennis Champion six times since 2000, and Marty has been Club Tennis Champion five times since 2001. Both continue to represent the Club in competitive league tennis play.



Jim Moore, six-time Club Tennis Champion; Marty Moore, five-time Club Tennis Champion

A more recent outstanding accomplishment of products of the Club's Junior Tennis Academy was the winning of the New York State High School Doubles Championship in 2012 by Doug Kaplan and Daniel Morgan, then seniors at Pelham Memorial High School, and sons of members Glyn Morgan and Josh Kaplan. Doug Kaplan was Club Tennis Champion in 2008 and 2011.



State High School Doubles Champions Doug Kaplan and Daniel Morgan

National Tennis Teams

From 2010 through 2012, the Club has fielded men's and women's teams at the USTA Open Level National Championships in Las Vegas, Nevada. The NYAC Men's Nationals, led by Captain Jeffrey Appel, have won the national championship in all three of their appearances in Las Vegas. The NYAC Women's National, led by Captain Alice Pirsu-Gesky, won the national championship in 2011, and took second in 2010 and 2012. The NYAC Nationals add tennis to the long list of amateur sports in which the Club consistently excels in national competition.



Structure of Tennis Committee

Tennis Committee Chairmen from the 1960's forward have been Jack McDermott, John Menna, Louis Martino, Charles DiSanto, Russ Young, William Lamrioux, Joe Solimine, Dr. Ignatius Pappalardo, Chris Tully, Larry Sturgis, Joe Urbinati, Paul Mansour, Bernie Gawley, Peter Corritori, and currently (2009 - 2013) Elia Clemente. The Tennis Committee Chairmen have been supported by men and women responsible for managing tennis tournaments, inter-club team play, court usage, instructional programs, youth programs, facilities maintenance, social events, and publicity. A total of 558 members, spouses, and children participated in the tennis program at Travers Island in 2012. Emphasis is placed on encouraging new players, especially young families with children, to participate in the NYAC tennis program, to assure that the median age of the players in the Club's tennis community does not advance each year.

2013, our 125th Anniversary season of tennis at Travers Island, promises to be another great year.