

The Milano Tennis Tradition

It is quite amazing how many members of the Henri Milano clan have turned to tennis as their favorite sport. The patriarch, Henri, (Hank) began playing in Salt Lake City, Utah, before attending high school. Once he enrolled in West High, Floyd Romney became his tennis coach. Henri and his partner, George Morris, were his favorites so he worked with them after school hours at Pioneer Park. Consequently, they went on to become champions even though George could not play on Saturdays because he had to shine shoes to earn money for his Greek father.

During this time, Henri and his family were living in the Elms Hotel located at 329 S. W. Temple in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah, (phone Wasatch 7359). While his father, Francesco, worked for Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, his mother operated the hotel. Times were lean in those days; the top price for a room was a dollar a day. There was no inside plumbing. Tenants shared a community bath and a community toilet. Little round, white, chamber pots sat under each bed. It became Henri's job to empty and sanitize them. Rooms were kept warm by small gas stoves that required lighting.

It was good news when a well-off chauffeur offered to rent a room for 6 months. Hank was thrilled to learn the man was not only adept at tennis but also a piano player. Hank's mother had a piano moved up the stairs and into his room. He owned one of the exclusive tennis rackets of that time: a Top Flight. It was a real rarity with its genuine gut strings and sold new for the (then) huge sum of \$15!

When the man got ready to leave, he asked Hank if he would care to have his racket, which was slightly cracked by then. "I sure would!" Hank responded, and went on to enjoy this prize for several years. Tennis balls were costly so it seemed like they had to be used forever. Restrunging a racket was much too expensive, so Francesco taught Henri to do a masterful job using a vise and an ice pick. Though it was tedious, it was sturdy and stood up well.

In 1935, Henri moved into the Proctor Hotel on 9th Street in Los Angeles, California, bringing along his racket and his accordion. He worked for Howell-Aretta Conservatory of Music, where he met and married Elma Allen who was not only a musician, but unbeknownst to him, had also taken up tennis.

It was not until a year after their wedding that they resumed their favorite sport. When they did so, Hank paid for private lessons which improved his backhand. He and Elma rode their bicycles from their home-studio at Olympic and Crenshaw Boulevards, past the La Brea Tar Pits, to tennis courts 10 miles north, which were nestled among the movie studios in Hollywood. Here Hank played all day while Elma sat cheering him on as she attempted, in vain, to acquire a tan.

After being inducted in the army during World War II, it wasn't until he was stationed at Camp Livingston, Louisiana, that Hank played tennis again for a short while. Soon thereafter, he experienced his final move to Camp Roberts, California, to be discharged. Afterwards, they decided against living in Los Angeles again.

They settled down in Mesa, Arizona, and established a music business while raising their six children. During this time, Hank played tennis with Linwood Noble, Dr. Neff, Dick Moody, Worth Phelps, and Dean Larsen and won many awards.

In 1961, while living in Utah, he teamed with Dick Young and won the Salt Lake Senior Doubles Championship. After this, he put his racket away until he was 70-years-old, when he hit a few balls with his son, Frank, who was visiting from Arizona.

Elma, the matriarch of the family, began her tennis playing while still attending 8th grade in La Canada, California. She doesn't remember taking any lessons but she does remember playing tennis after school and then walking 3 miles home. Her father probably acquired her racket from one of his generous friends, because, until Elma became a professional accordionist, she never remembers having a dime of her own.

Once she began performing, she was soon making more money than any of her other friends. From then on, she never had a minute to even think about tennis: she arose at 6:00 a.m., walked 3 1/2 miles to attend Eagle Rock High School, walked 3 1/2 miles home (uphill), another 1/2 mile back to the end of the streetcar line (at times, carrying her accordion), rode to downtown Los Angeles where she walked two more blocks to Howell-Aretta at 215 W. 9th Street, climbed two flights of stairs and acted as a receptionist until time to borrow a car and drive to her destination where she donned her heavy accordion and strolled about, many times performing until 2:00 a.m. (No wonder she developed such stamina!)

In 1950, when Elma designed their home in Mesa, Arizona, she did so with the Frank Lloyd Wright functional style in mind. In so doing, she put a closet just inside of the garage so they could store their well-worn tennis gear. Their accordions were kept in their bedrooms.

In 1961, after Elma and Hank were divorced, she once again began playing tennis very early on week mornings before the children were awake (it was safe in those days). Dashing around and bashing the ball was therapeutic as she released the tensions built up from trying to operate the music store while raising six children by herself. She always maintained that if she won, she was playing too much tennis. Eventually, she did manage to win a few matches and generally won in their daily mixed doubles.

When their son, Frank, reached 28-years-of-age, he too, took an interest in tennis. He mentioned this to his mother who gave him a couple of lessons before he took off on his own. He played more as a means of keeping physically fit than as a means of winning.

When Frank takes an interest in anything, he usually keeps going and going until he feels satisfied. With tennis, his interest peaked when he owned a tennis shop called, "Racquet Warehouse" located where Linton Milano is now housed, at 45 West Main in downtown Mesa, Arizona. He still has an obsession with athletic shoes of which he has acquired a goodly number which are worn for most all his occasions.

In 2003, at fifty-seven-years-of-age, Frank stays physically fit by going to Mesa Country Club twice a week and paying his coach, Mike Van Zuphen, by the hour to run him around the courts.

Frank's sons, Mike and Jeff, were the first of the next generation to show an interest in tennis. Jeff has maintained the most interest, perhaps because people are always telling him he looks like a clone of the world champion, Andre Agassi?

The next athletes on the courts were Margaret and Dennis' two daughters, Mila Marie and Marianne. They not only won tennis matches, but went on to coach summer classes for youth. Dennis also had two sisters, Sue and Diane Palmer, who were tennis champions.

Ida's husband, Brad, plays a fine game of tennis and their eldest son, Devin, played on the Mesa High JV team. Their eldest daughter, Katy , played on the Taylor Jr. High team.

To add a bit of trivia to the above account, let us consider our 92-year-old neighbor, a retired minister, who was 85-years-old when he finally hung up his racket!

Even though we know that God is ultimately in control, we have to think about the fact that both Hank and Frank's heart murmurs did not slow their tennis down, and that it took a heart attack before Elma retired from the courts at sixty. Let us hope that our Milano Family Tennis Tradition has contributed to our overall longevity and well being!

P.S. Hank has done a splendid job of preserving a treasure chest of awards in tennis, printing, and art, for his posterity to enjoy. Thus, when proof of the family tennis tradition is needed, the proof wiD be available; folks won't blame his tales of victory on his old age (ha!).