

What's Up With ... Paul Tobin

In anticipation of the 2024 opening of the new St. Louis Tennis Hall of Fame at the Armory, 2016 inductee Ron Cobb will be writing regular "What's Up With" features on Hall of Fame members and updates about the Hall of Fame.

As a youngster, Paul Tobin hung out at the Washington U. tennis courts, hoping to find someone to play or hit with. The courts were just a 10-minute walk from his home in University City.

Paul considers himself blessed to have grown up in that environment. To him, those courts were to outdoor tennis what the Armory was to indoor tennis.

"If you went out there in the early '60s," he said, "you'd have seen Carol Aucamp, Mary Ann Beattie, Justina Bricka, Frank Conner, Ralph Hart, Bill Heinbecker, Jerry Johnson, Al Holtman, Arthur Ashe, Bobby McKinley, Larry Parker, Jimmy Parker ... they'd all be playing those courts."



Larry Miller and Carol Aucamp were the two who took Paul under their wings.

"Carol was my angel," Paul said. "She treated me like her little brother. Larry and Carol and Don Aucamp taught me how to play and teach the game of tennis.

"I'd go up to WashU early in the morning and stay all day and learn from just watching all those great players."

There were a couple of other youngsters – even younger than Paul – who showed up at WashU. Paul remembers a time when he was 11 and a big, black Dodge convertible pulled up. Four people piled out – Gloria Connors, Bertha "Two Mom" Thompson, 9-year-old John Connors and 8-year-old Jimmy Connors.

Gloria saw Paul and said "you want to play my boys?" and Paul said "sure."

Gloria said Paul could play John first while Jimmy watched from the bleachers.

"John beat me 6-1 and I'm thinking, 'well, he's beaten me pretty bad, but I know I can beat the little guy.' And then Jimmy beat me 6-0."

The guy who Jimmy put a bagel on was no schlump. Playing at U. City High, Paul was runner-up in doubles with Ralph Hart at the state tournament. A year later, Paul went to Mesa Community College in Arizona and won the national junior college singles title, capping a season in which he didn't lose a match.

A year or so later, Paul and Larry Parker won the National Public Parks doubles title at a time when that tournament carried a lot of prestige.

Paul had enough game to play Division I tennis, but he needed to bring his grades up. That's how he first ended up at Mesa. But after that one season there, he was at the juco nationals when he bumped into Leo Estopare, the three-time Missouri high school singles champion from Roosevelt High, who was playing for Odessa (Texas) Junior College. They were recruited by West Texas State and wound up going there together.



*National City Championship team-top L-R Paul, Mike Pelletier, Danny Huber, Coach Lloyd Brown
Bottom L-R Jimmy Connors, Leo Estopare, Jimmy Parker*

When Steve Apted and Lou Sachs opened Castle Oak Tennis Club in 1974, they hired one teaching pro – Paul – and made him director of tennis. Paul was a couple of years out of college and had just one year’s experience at Meadowbrook Country Club and Creve Coeur Racquet Club.

At CCRC, Paul worked under Apted and Larry Miller. They must have liked what they saw in a short period of time, because Paul was Apted’s choice for Castle Oak.

“Steve took a big chance on me because I was 25 and never had any head pro experience other than Meadowbrook,” Paul said.

When Paul got the job and moved into a house within a year, he told his wife, Chrissy, “This is a starter job, and this is a starter house.” He was wrong on both counts.

They’re still in that house, and while Castle Oak changed its name to Chesterfield Athletic Club in 2005, it didn’t change its director of tennis for 47½ years. Paul never imagined he would be there that long. He retired in June 2021, and now he’s got something else to celebrate. He and Chrissy have been married 50 years and celebrated with a trip to Italy this spring.

Two years after he started at Castle Oak, Paul reconnected with John Connors, who joined the staff as a teaching pro. Although John didn’t work there long, Paul became a hitting partner with Jimmy when he’d drop by the club.

“People would say, ‘Oh, you played Jimmy Connors.’ But I never really played him. I hit with him,” Paul said. “If I played him a set, he’d give me both alleys and I couldn’t double fault, and if I missed a return, he’d serve again.

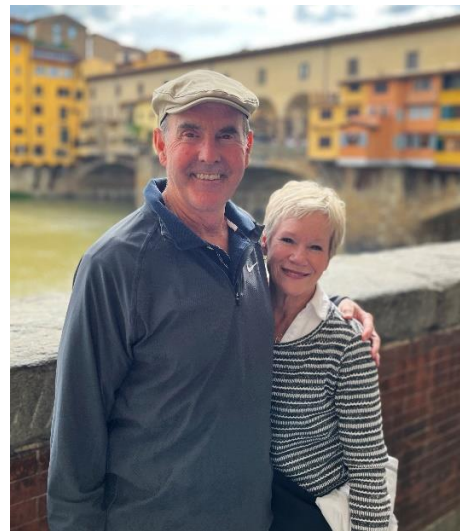
“I was eons away from that level, but I worked hard and I’d hit a lot of balls to him. Gloria saw something there that she liked, so she kept me hitting with him.”

All of those years on the court took a toll on Paul. He has two artificial hips, one artificial knee, a meniscus tear in the other and, this summer, a knee replacement.

Retirement suits Paul well, affording him plenty of time to spend with the children of his daughter Anna Barrett and his son Paul Matthew Tobin. Paul and Chrissy also have a son, Patrick, who lives in Chicago.

“Fifty years was enough,” Paul said. “I love being retired. We have seven real active grandkids, so we babysit a lot. We try to see every game and every school thing they’re in, which I was never able to do when I was working.”

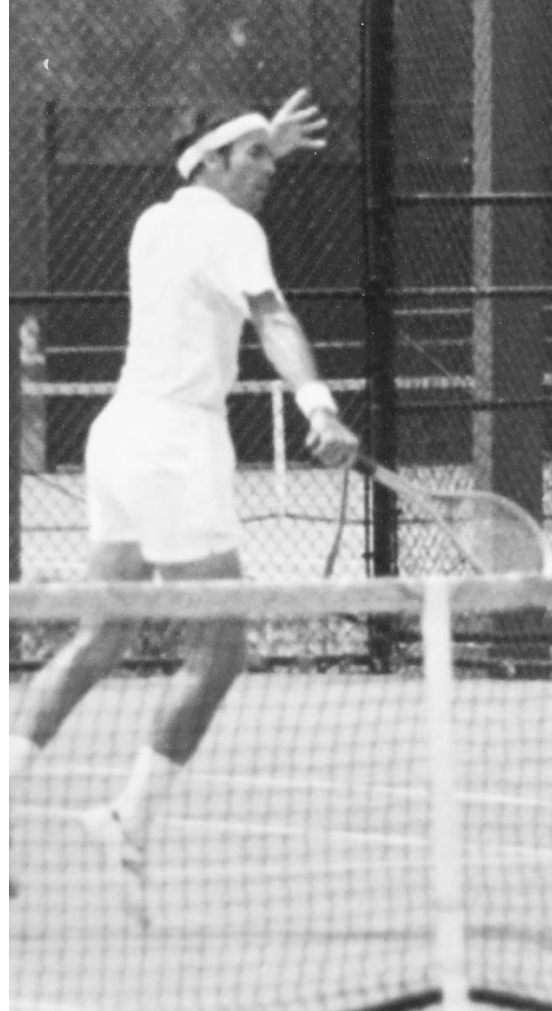
Looking back, Paul says “no regrets.”



Paul and Chrissy in Italy

“Larry Miller, Carol Aucamp, Steve Apted, they made it all worthwhile and gave me a great life, great profession,” he said. “My job was so much easier because of the great support of the members. From day one, they were so generous to my wife and me.

“I also had a great boss in Laurel Noel. She was always in my corner. I owe her a lot.”



Paul Tobin was inducted into the St. Louis Tennis Hall of Fame with his former U. City High School teammate Ralph Hart in 2020.

— SAINT LOUIS —
TENNIS HALL OF FAME
— ★ AT THE ARMORY ★ —