

## TENNIS

Sitting in the corner of my room, behind my two-drawer filing cabinet, is my last tennis racket. It is a “Prince Classic.” And it is a pretty classy “classic.” Aluminum (not graphite—that’s for pencils) with green trim, tightly strung, 27 inches, 4 ½ inch grip, with a white and green cover. I really liked that racket. When it was time for me to get a new racket—about 25 years ago, I decided to treat myself. I haven’t used it in years. I guess it is time to pass it on to “Goodwill.”

Growing up in the East Bronx in the late ‘30s, early ‘40s, the idea of playing tennis was inconceivable. It was a rich man’s sport, like golf. There were no tennis courts around, just as there were no golf courses. What we played was handball. All you needed was a spauldeen (the pink rubber ball made by Spaulding) and a wall. (Real handball players used a small black ball, but we weren’t real handball players.) When we wanted to play ball, we would grab our spauldeden, call a friend, and head for the schoolyard. PS 39, across the street on Longwood Avenue, had the perfect wall. However, if we wanted variety, we would go to JHS 52, four blocks away, which had a back wall. This enabled us to play off the back wall, something like squash. Our friend Mel gave this variation of handball the name “cootchie.” And he always beat us.

In Stuyvesant High School, we had a tennis team, but of course, none of us played. Mel was the first to pick up a racket. He had moved to the West Bronx where some of his new friends played the game. By the time we entered college, several of us decided to give it a shot. We bought our first rackets and a can of balls, and felt like Joe College getting out on a tennis court. The only tennis court that I can remember was in Pelham Bay Park. There must have been others. Possibly, Crotona Park. None within walking distance. I believe we had to buy a tennis pass to use the municipal courts.

In 1957, we moved to Brooklyn. I played occasionally, but was never really proficient at the game. I had a nice wooden racket, I believe it was a Slazenger. I also had a nice wooden racket press, to keep the nice wooden racket from warping. The strings were restrung a couple times. I often played with balls which had lost their bounce, and on courts where the nets sagged, and the surface was cracked and uneven. It really didn’t matter. I struggled to learn how to serve, and to keep score: 15-love, deuce, ad, etc. Most of the time, we just hit the ball back and forth until someone missed. We noticed that many people playing tennis were dressed in tennis whites and wore white tennis shoes. We wore shorts and a T shirt and the only pair of sneakers we owned. We also picked up the little courtesies of returning balls which came onto your court.

For three or four summers, in the early ‘60s, the family spent a month at a bungalow colony on Bantam Lake in Connecticut. There was one tennis court, in terrible shape, seldom used, and every weekend Irv Pfefferblit and I would play for about an hour in the morning and then again, in the afternoon. We were fairly evenly matched, though he may have been a little better than me. One Sunday afternoon as we were leaving the court, someone’s weekend guest commented, “For someone who plays so much tennis, you sure play a lousy game.” It was true, but I did not want to correct him with regard to how much tennis I played.

We moved to Washington D.C. in 1965, and I continued to play occasionally. My proficiency had not improved. Yet I was able to introduce my son Lewis to the game. We played at a nearby tennis court in Takoma Park, and we would hit the ball back and forth. I taught him how to grip the racket, how to hit the ball, how to serve, and how to keep score. The following summer, we discovered that the District of Columbia had a tennis camp, and Lewis attended, and he really learned how to play tennis. The next time we played, it was clear that he was better than me. I continued to play.

My work with the US Civil Right Commission was not all work. I looked forward to the meetings of the regional directors which rotated among the cities where we had regional offices. In the south and west, many of the hotels in which we stayed had tennis courts, and many of the regional directors played tennis. This was my introduction to “doubles.” By this time, I had been following professional tennis, and watched the US Open and Wimbledon, singles, doubles and mixed doubles, thinking I can pick up some pointers.

Whenever my friends and I had the opportunity, we played. I have fond memories of playing tennis with Sid in Stockbridge. I think that Mel, Sid, Bob and I even played doubles once or twice. Mel was in a class by himself. He had a serve none of us could return. I had a serve which landed in the opposite court about half the time. Sometimes, my friends let me bounce the ball and hit it, rather than toss it up.

After Fran and I married, we visited her friends Fran and Raymond in Hunter NY, during the summer. They had a tennis court nearby, and Raymond and I would play. He insisted on keeping score, and he beat me most of the time. Coming off the court around 1988 or 1989, my knees were killing me. I took some painkiller. We played again the next day. The pain was worse. Getting out of the car, after we drove home, I could hardly stand.

My doctor told me I had osteoarthritis. Should I continue playing tennis? If I don't mind the pain. Take some painkiller. So I took some painkiller. I played less. The arthritis got worse. I had an injection of some steroid, and then orthoscopic surgery. I tried glucosamine, chondroitin, and finally in 2008, knee replacement surgery on my right knee—the worse one.

In 2004, we moved into the Brook House, a great condominium with lots of extras, including tennis courts. But by this time, I had trouble walking, let alone playing tennis. When I was younger, I would have killed for courts like these. I did hit a tennis ball with a friend once or twice, but that was it. A couple of years after the surgery, I decided I would hit the ball against the wall like the old days, just to get the feel of the racket. It felt good. However, it was painful, trying to run after the ball, and bending down. I tried it again some months later. This time, my feet got tangled up going for a back hand, and I tripped and fell. That was the last time I used my racket, which is now going to Goodwill. I hope someone will enjoy it.