


# Tennis titans talk history at Irvington

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KERRY EGGERS ON SPORTS/



TRIBUNE PHOTO: KERRY EGGERS - Two major figures in local tennis, Brian Parrott (left) and Harry Merlo, chat during the Celebration of the History of Tennis in Oregon at the Irvington Club.

If there is hallowed ground in the sovereignty of tennis in Oregon, it's the Irvington Club.

From 1898, when Irvington became the first tennis club in the state, until now, the Northeast Portland facility has been at the heart of the sport.

It was a fitting venue for 150 local enthusiasts, top players and executives and, in a few cases, local legends to convene for a “Celebration of the History of Tennis in Oregon.”

I was invited as the scribe who has been writing about the sport in Portland newspapers for four decades. There had to be some member of the Fourth Estate who cares about the sport still out there hacking away, right? That’s me.

So it was fun to hang out with some familiar faces and watch master of ceremonies Brian Parrott hold court for more than an hour in the fireside room at Irvington on Sunday, reliving history and recalling anecdotes “as only Brian can,” as Irvington general manager Barb Farmer put it.

The event was made possible through the work of the Oregon Tennis Historical Committee, which includes chairman Steve Hall and members Parrott, Farmer, Wayne Pickard, Bob Howard and Mike Stone. Irvington had played host to a similar gathering 20 years ago.

“We felt it was time to do it again, while people are still alive, so they can join us and celebrate with us,” Farmer said. “It was a slam-dunk to have Brian MC this thing.”

Parrott, 68, now lives in Greene, Iowa, but his heart remains in Portland, where he began a long career as a teaching pro and sports event promoter. Parrott, in fact, served as the first full-time head teaching pro at Irvington for four years in the 1970s, so his perspective and storytelling ability were perfect for the occasion.

Around the room were folks who spanned generations of tennis in the state. I found myself wishing that Jim Flynn — the longtime Portland Tennis Center director who died in March — were on hand. He would have really enjoyed the scene.

Old-timers Jack Neer and Marion Blackburn ... Pickard, Roger McKee, Mike Tammen, Brian Joelson, Len Wofford and John Hermanson ... Jason Thompson, Jonathan Stark and Travis Parrott ... that’s a lot of tennis talent in one room.

There were important executives on hand, too, including Don Tisdell and Mike Kohlhoff, both longtime members of the USTA national board.

“This is like a tennis dream,” Brian Parrott observed. “The history in this room is remarkable.”

Parrott was speaking not only about people but about archives. Farmer and her staff decorated the place with photos, scrapbook items, souvenirs and a chronological history of tennis in the state, all on the site that hosted the first state tennis tournament back in 1899.

“What this club has done for tennis, not only locally but nationally, is amazing,” Parrott said. “The collective body of people here has made a difference.”

Local players from different eras who made their mark on a national and international basis were recalled. There was Sam Lee, a former NCAA doubles champion at Stanford (1933) and charter member of the PNW Hall of Fame. And Elwood Cooke, who lost to Bobby Riggs in the 1939

Wimbledon singles finals but won the doubles with Riggs. And Wayne Sabin, who reached the 1941 U.S. Open men's doubles finals.

And more recently, Medford's Stark, who won two Grand Slam doubles titles, played Davis Cup and was ranked as high as No. 1 in the world in doubles. And Joelson, who teamed with son Brett to win a remarkable nine straight USTA National Father/Son championships. And Travis Parrott, one of Brian's four sons, who won the 2009 U.S. Open mixed doubles title.

Displayed in one corner of the room was an article I'd written on Travis, then 5 years old, in 1985 as the youngest ever to play the PNTA junior circuit. "It's too early to talk about a potential pro career," I wrote then. Little did I know.

His father wound up bringing dozens of exhibitions featuring the world's greatest players to Portland over a 15-year span. It all began in 1971, when Parrott served as the first director of the Pacific Coast Indoor at Irvington. UCLA's Jimmy Connors finished third and won a clock radio that year.

"That got me hooked on promoting," Parrott said.

Parrott brought in 17-year-old German Boris Becker in 1985, the year he won the first of six Grand Slam singles titles. And 15-year-old Tracy Austin in 1978, first for an Avon Futures event, then for a charity exhibition the week after she beat Chris Evert to become the youngest-ever U.S. Open champion.

Parrott's legacy, however, was in luring the Davis Cup to Portland — first in 1981 and '84 in quarterfinal and semifinal ties between the U.S. and Australia, then playing a key role in landing the 2007 finals between the U.S. and Russia.

It wouldn't have happened without Harry Merlo, 91, who was in attendance Sunday along with longtime partner Flo Newton.

Merlo, the founder of timber giant Louisiana-Pacific and a sports enthusiast, became acquainted with Parrott, who convinced him to finance a six-figure bid to lure the first Davis Cup tie to Portland. Merlo later bought the Portland Timbers to keep the pro soccer club in town.

"The amount of good this man has done for our community is staggering," said Parrott, and those in the crowd agreed, rewarding Merlo with the biggest ovation of the day.

Representatives of Japan's Nippon Electric Company flew to Portland to watch the Davis Cup in 1981. They came away so impressed that they established a new plant in Hillsboro, eventually bringing \$700 million in economic development to the area, Parrott said.

The Davis Cup returns to Portland for a fourth time in July with a quarterfinal tie between the U.S. and Croatia.

"That's more than in any U.S. city in the open era (since 2008)," Parrott said.

That's pretty cool, just as it was to have so many people who helped make tennis important in our state all together in one room for one more poignant moment.

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*COURTESY: SOREN COUGHLIN-GLASER - The gang's all here: Tennis luminaries and enthusiasts gather at the Irvington Club to celebrate the history of the sport in Oregon*