

The rise and fall of the Cascades: Portland's wild '70s adventure in World Team Tennis

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photoThe Sea-Port Cascades hired Seattle native and former Wimbledon semifinalist Tom Gorman as player-coach.

The Soviets landed in Portland on a steamy summer morning. Almost immediately, the possibility of nuclear war came up.

Natasha Chmyreva, one of the U.S.S.R.'s representatives, stared at the local reporter who raised the subject.

"I haven't heard much about the neutron bomb," she said in careful English. "As far as I know, my government is interested in only peace."

This wasn't the answer Don Kelleher wanted to hear. The Commies were perhaps his last, best hope to make it in Portland. He needed conflict, the Cold War clash ratcheted up to the level of the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#).

The 42-year-old California businessman had come to Portland nine months before because he wanted to build a sports empire. The Trail Blazers, on their way to a championship, hadn't been for sale, but Kelleher probably could have found a professional basketball team in his price range somewhere in the country. The question was: why would he want one? The National Basketball Association was struggling, its TV ratings falling precipitously.

Tennis: that's where it was at. Yes, tennis. Specifically, the coed, envelope-pushing World Team Tennis.

Back in 1977, WTT was the big time. The players wore blow-dried Farrah Fawcett hair (we're talking about the men) and bun-hugging, multicolored uniforms (still the men), but this was an endeavor the sports world had to take seriously.

"World Team Tennis was a big, big thing back then," says [Tom Gorman](#), a Top 10 player in the 1970s and a former U.S. Davis Cup captain. "There was a lot of excitement about the league. All the biggest stars wanted to be a part of it."

With rock 'n' roll thumping through arena speakers during matches, many observers believed WTT might eventually leave the NBA and the National Hockey League in the dust. The TV networks regularly broadcast matches, and coverage made the front page of sports sections across the country. [Elton John](#) wrote the theme song for the Philadelphia Freedoms, his favorite team. America's tennis sweetheart, [Chris Evert](#), would soon sign a long-term contract with the Los Angeles Strings for a whopping \$1.2 million.

The Northwest finally got in on the excitement when Kelleher relocated his Hawaii Leis to Portland and Seattle after the '76 season, renaming the team the Sea-Port Cascades. The move would turn out to be a huge mistake.



[Enlarge Special to The Oregonian](#) A University of Washington grad, Patricia Bostrom returned to the Northwest to play World Team Tennis for the Cascades. (Photo courtesy of Patricia Bostrom) [Cascades](#) gallery (15 photos)

By the time the Cascades began play, the three-year-old WTT was already having trouble. Like the North American Soccer League (birthplace of the [Portland Timbers](#)), World Team Tennis reached for the big time too soon. In 1976, attendance during the 13-week season grew 78 percent over the previous year, but it wasn't nearly enough to keep up with salaries.

This free-spending attitude hurt smaller-market teams like Portland most of all. The Cascades couldn't promise top players the level of national exposure that Los Angeles, New York or Chicago could. And Kelleher's wallet wasn't as fat as those wielded by the fat-cat owners who dominated the league, such as [Jerry Buss](#) and [Bob Kraft](#). All of this meant that most of the league's attendance gains came in a few big cities. During their last season in Hawaii, the Leis brought in only 2,500 fans per match.

So there would be no stars on the Cascades. Kelleher had tried to lure infamous bad boy [Ilie Nastase](#) to the Northwest, but the Romanian chose Los Angeles instead for \$1.5 million over six years, plus two gleaming silver Corvettes. Kelleher came close to signing popular Australian [Evonne Goolagong](#), a former Wimbledon champion, but she became pregnant and dropped out of the season.

What to do, what to do?

[Moneyball](#) analytics didn't exist at the time, so Kelleher and executive vice president Rudy Tulipani went with another measure: local appeal. They signed Gorman, a former Seattle Prep and Seattle University standout, as player-coach. The 31-year-old had put together a solid career over the past decade, reaching the semifinals at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. But he wasn't a star -- except in the Northwest.

"All my life I've had this fantasy about representing Seattle in a team sport," Gorman told the press, an enthusiastic smile stretched across his square, workingman's face. Later, the Portland office -- the Cascades maintained separate staff for each home base -- would encourage him to also mention the smaller city next time he waxed poetic about coming home.

The team's next prize signing was 25-year-old Patricia Bostrom, a doubles specialist of no name recognition -- except, of course, in the Northwest. The scrappy Bostrom played at the University of Washington right before the landmark [Title IX](#) ruling changed the college landscape for women athletes. She'd tried out for the men's team because the women's squad was considered "[just a social club.](#)"

"Tom and I were the two big names for tennis at that time in the area," recalls Bostrom, who's now a lawyer in Seattle. "They were looking to us to draw fans in."

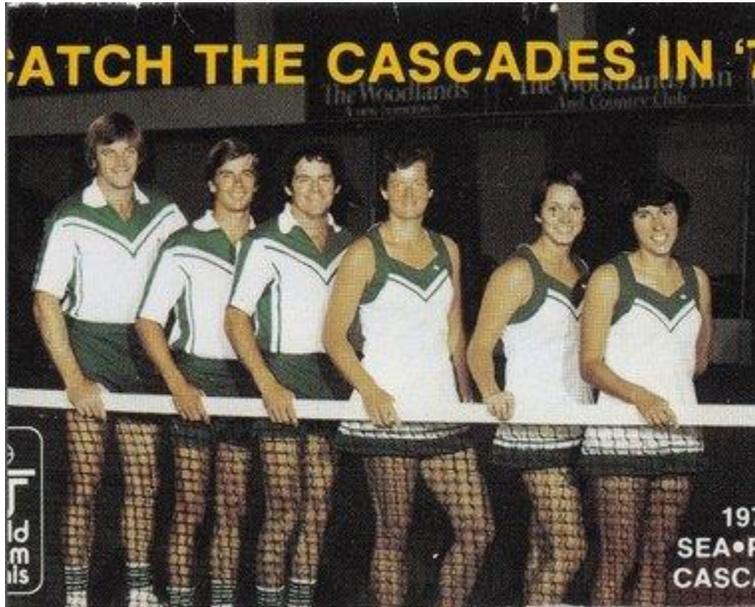
Kelleher knew that hometown heroes would only give him so much pop at the box office. An even better way to attract fans was to win matches. This, needless to say, was the more difficult path to profitability. To take on the likes of Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova and other Grand Slam champions, he recruited unheralded [JoAnne Russell](#) and [Betty Stove](#).

Ground control to Major Tom: Good luck.

League co-founder and 12-time major singles champion [Billie Jean King](#) didn't want World Team Tennis to be staid and dignified like Wimbledon. For starters, WTT encouraged spectators to taunt visiting teams; King hoped fans would act just like they did at Major League Baseball and National Football League games. (King's brother, [Randy Moffitt](#), was a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants.)

The league did everything it could to make this most tradition-encrusted, international sport conform to mainstream American tastes. The matches -- singles, doubles and mixed-doubles played on fast, multicolored felt-carpet courts -- were decided by accumulated games won rather

than sets. Substitutions were allowed. The league invented the super-tiebreaker. Some of the women wore shorter dresses and tighter blouses than they ever dared sport at the game's citadels.



[View full size](#) Courtesy of Patricia BostromThe 1977 Cascades team.

Tennis' purists gagged, but the players quickly adapted.

"People yelled and screamed at matches; they got up in the middle of play and walked out to get popcorn -- it was so different from the decorum at tournaments," Gorman recalls. "But once you got used to it, it became fun. After playing the WTT season, I would go out and play tournaments and think, 'God, this crowd is so *boring*.' "

The Soviet players might have appreciated some boring crowds. The Soviet National Team joined the league at the same time as the Cascades and essentially only played away games. For WTT, bringing in the communists was a high-concept publicity stunt. Every team in the league hoped for a spike in interest when the Russians came to town; the P.R. department would rile up the home crowd by presenting the red-clad visitors as [Boris Badenov](#) evil-doers.

"We just kind of laughed at that," Gorman says. "We knew all their players and liked them."

The Soviets' 28-year-old star [Olga Morozova](#), the Wimbledon singles finalist in 1974, was a relaxed and open-faced former physical-education teacher. Amazed at the harsh, sometimes bizarre questions she was getting from reporters, she once responded: "You think we come from the moon?"

The younger Chmyreva better fit the preconceptions. The tall, angular 18-year-old could be standoffish, her long blond tresses and hooded eyes giving her an air of mystery. But her game was so beautiful that she picked up fans at every stop. In Portland a reporter asked if she saw big things for herself in the years ahead. After all, she had already twice beaten Evert, the top-ranked women's player in the world.

Chmyreva didn't take the compliment lightly. She paused, looked down at her hands. "I haven't planned a big future," she said quietly.

Two years later, Chmyreva would suddenly disappear from the tour. [Rumor had it](#) her right to travel abroad had been revoked, ending her tennis career. Her crime? It seemed she spent too much time socializing with Westerners. Today, more than two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, she lives in obscurity, one of the great might-have-beens of international tennis.

At Memorial Coliseum in July, however, she was very much present. She played Stove in the opener, floating across the court like a dancer, hitting pure, classic strokes. The towering Stove stayed with her by hitting huge serves and sticking her volleys. Stove finally won the set in a tense, tight tiebreaker. The Soviets fought back with strong doubles and mixed-doubles performances, but Gorman himself pushed the home team to victory with clutch play in overtime. The win proved to be a key one. It put the Cascades over .500 for the first time since early in the season and moved them into second place in the West Division.



[View full size](#)File photoNatasha Chmyreva: "The Soviet Chris Evert."

But the match also provided some bad news for the team. Only two thousand fans showed up at Memorial Coliseum to watch the Cascades battle the communists for God and country. It seemed that Portland, with its burgeoning peacenik identity, didn't want to buy into the Cold War face-off.

The low turnout was becoming commonplace. A week earlier, a match against Nastase's L.A. Strings made the Cascades owner realize his Portland experiment wasn't working out.

"This is ridiculous," Kelleher said after the Strings match. "I know it's hot in there, but I'm very disappointed in the crowd. Can you imagine just that many people turning out to see a match with the players involved in tonight's match?"

Nastase, Evert, Navratilova, Rod Laver, Bjorn Borg -- the sport's biggest names came to Portland, but none of them could bring out the locals in big numbers.

Portland just wasn't a very good tennis city, local fan Emery Neale told *The Oregonian*, noting that the Cascades' Seattle matches were drawing better crowds. "Portland rapidly is becoming better, but cities like San Francisco, Oakland or Los Angeles are miles ahead of us in interest."

There had to be something to Neale's analysis, because the problem certainly wasn't that the Cascades played uninteresting tennis. They'd become known for kamikaze tactics, with Gorman encouraging every player "to be very aggressive and just go for it" at the key point in sets. Indeed, Memorial Coliseum was home to one of the most surprising and spectacular sets of tennis of the whole year, when on August 5 the Cascades' [Steve Docherty](#), a journeyman player, took on Borg, the reigning Wimbledon champion and new Cleveland Nets star.

When told he'd be facing the player known as The Viking God in front of a home crowd, Docherty, a transplanted Australian and the former pro at Portland's [West Hills Racquet Club](#), blanched. "I thought he was going to throw up," Gorman says now, laughing.

But the coach knew what he was doing. Ever since making a surprise run through Wimbledon qualifying to ultimately reach the second round of the prestigious tournament, the 6'5" Docherty had been confidently blasting serves past his WTT opponents. "The only thing he forgot to do," wrote *The Oregonian* after one Cascades match, "was hand out catcher's masks to the crowd fielding his serves in the end-zone seats." (The Cascades' women also had a great Wimbledon: Russell won the doubles title with former Hawaii Leis player Helen Gourlay and Stove reached the singles final, by far her best result at a major.)



[View full size](#)File photo6'5", muttonchopped Steve Docherty.

Against Borg in Portland, Docherty played the set of his life, throwing down a barrage of blistering serves and all-or-nothing forehands. Every shot sounded like it came from a cannon. The world's top player tried to attack, too, but he found himself struggling to keep pace. Borg cracked at 2-all, giving up a service break with back-to-back groundstroke errors. Docherty ran out the set 6-4.

The Cascades were making a late-season move, but even Docherty's huge upset -- front page news in Borg's native Stockholm -- failed to move the needle in Bridgetown. Enthusiasm seemed to fall week by week. Portland fans wondered if their city's easy-does-it vibe squelched the

showmanship of the league's stars. The local press corps expressed befuddlement when Nastase of all people behaved himself while in town.

"You think my behavior was good? I'm sure you heard what I said during the match," the Romanian told a reporter after a tame performance in Portland. "What else you want me to do?"

More than a curse word directed smilingly at the umpire, that was for sure. Couldn't he have at least dropped his pants, as he was known to enjoy doing?

Don Kelleher wished he could be so lucky.

For many WTT players, the team concept was a welcome innovation, a different way of thinking about their sport.

"It was just like basketball or football, with the league holding a draft. We were all shocked to be drafted that first season," recalls Bostrom, who was picked by the Boston Lobsters.

Then there was the money. A four-month contract with a healthy, guaranteed salary was an entirely new thing for players accustomed to the pay-as-you-go pro circuit. For a player like Bostrom, who concentrated on doubles rather than the more lucrative singles, World Team Tennis made the touring life much easier. "You could earn enough in WTT to pay for the rest of the season," she says.

Plus, for more than three months every year, players had a real home. The WTT season ran through the summer, with a break in the middle for Wimbledon. (No such break was given for the French Open. This forced WTT players to skip it, leading Roland Garros officials to worry their tournament would lose its status as a major.)

Despite the individual nature of tennis, players found they easily bonded with their teammates and embraced their home cities. After the Pittsburgh Triangles won the WTT title in 1975, Triangles star [Vitas Gerulaitis](#) invited everyone in the Steel City's Civic Arena to join him for a post-match celebration at a hotel suite. (Many fans took him up on the offer.) Players discussed match strategy during the seemingly endless plane trips between cities. Some teammates became roommates during the WTT season to cut costs.

"I loved it," Gorman says of his time in World Team Tennis. "I played team sports as a kid, and so it was really great to be able to do that in tennis."

"We had real team spirit," says Bostrom. "It was a highly competitive league, with the best players. We all felt there was a lot to play for. Your teammates would be yelling for you during a match, cheering you on; it was great."

The league also had a wider impact on the sport, especially for the women. The women's tour at the time was still trying to find its feet. The women played for less money and at smaller venues

than the men, and the quality of their fields was shallower. In many ways the women's tour was a ragtag operation. On occasion, players had to moonlight as ball girls at their own tournaments. When the men created the Association of Tennis Professionals in 1972, they didn't even consider including the women.

"The Virginia Slims (women's) tour was completely separate from the men's tour. We would only see the men during the Grand Slam tournaments," recalls Bostrom. "(WTT) was great because we learned a lot from practicing with the men, training with the men, playing against them for three months every season.

"From this combination (of the tours) came some marriages," she adds, mentioning 1977 Australian Open champion [Kerry Melville](#) and Grover "Raz" Reid, who met while playing for the Lobsters. "And we got to know all the gossip from the men's circuit!"



[View full size](#) Oregonian file photo Cascades exec Rudy Tulipani and owner Don Kelleher at Memorial Coliseum after a match.

The players may have felt that team tennis' time had come, but Kelleher wasn't so sure. Money was so tight he refused to spring for hotel rooms during the Cascades' 11 home matches in Portland. The players had apartments in Seattle during the season.

After every Portland match, remembers Gorman, "We'd race to catch the last Braniff (Airways) flight to Seattle, a 10:30 or 11 o'clock flight. Half the time we didn't have time to shower before. We'd get on the plane in our tennis clothes, sweating, carrying our street clothes in a bag. (The Braniff crew) knew we were coming and they'd hold the plane and be waving at us to hurry up, to run."

"We used to hate that," Bostrom laughs. "I tell you, we'd *run*."

It was a sign of humiliations to come. By the middle of the season, Kelleher had decided the dual-city approach couldn't work. He would have to choose between Portland and Seattle. [Big](#)

[Bill Walton](#) and the Trail Blazers had proved that Portlanders would come out to support a sports team, but the Cascades' owner wondered if Blazermania was an aberration. With every home match, Portland felt more and more like a city that was too small and insular for an expensive professional sports team with an international portfolio. This was a town of vegetarians, of rebels and environmentalists -- "woody witchdoctors of a revived ancient nature cult," in the words of one frustrated industrialist.

"I think he was in favor of moving the team here (to Portland) until about the last three matches," said Judy Daigle, the Cascades' Portland assistant general manager, shortly after the season ended.

The real kick in the gut came in the playoffs. With everyone on the team contributing down the stretch -- Russell, Stove, Gorman and Erik Van Dillen in doubles, Bostrom and Docherty in mixed, Gorman and Stove in singles -- the Cascades ran off a string of victories to score the franchise's first postseason appearance ever. Yet all of 700 people turned up for Portland's playoff match, even with Chris Evert on the bill. "(The players) were super disappointed with the playoff crowd," Kelleher told a reporter. "They kind of couldn't believe it."

Less than a month later, Kelleher announced that the team would pull out of Portland. They would now be simply the Seattle Cascades. The gate receipts had spoken: Seattle was a sports town, Portland wasn't.

Not that the Emerald City would get to enjoy the tennis boom all that much longer than Portland. The Soviets returned to Moscow after the '77 season, the Pittsburgh franchise folded. World Team Tennis lurched haplessly through 1978, the salaries of its big stars weighing on it like a woody witchdoctor's hex. Soon after the season ended, the league collapsed. The purists could exhale. Tennis would return to the decorum and traditions of the past. (A few years later, WTT would be revived, but [this incarnation](#) -- still ongoing -- is closer to an annual exhibition series, featuring chiefly college players and pro stars who have retired from the tour.)

Most of the players in 1978 had no idea the end was coming. Everyone recognized that some teams were having serious financial difficulties, but attendance was still rising, fan enthusiasm seemed to be building. Teams were talking about the next season right up until the very end -- and even beyond. After the league ceased operations, the San Francisco franchise, the Golden Gaters, illogically announced it would soldier on.

Gorman admits he was "very disappointed" when the league disintegrated. "I had a three-year contract, and the third year wasn't guaranteed." He laughs. "I lived on a houseboat in Seattle; I loved being home in the summer. Now it was back on the tour, back to the grind."

-- [Douglas Perry](#)