

Lee: Tennis legend kept weekly lunch dates

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Tennis Hall of Fame.

Brian Parrott remembers teaming with Bill Rose to face Sam and longtime partner Emery Neale in the finals of the 1970 Rose Festival Tournament. Parrott was 22. Lee was 56.

"That's how good Sam was," says Parrott, also a fixture in the tennis community and now a candidate for the Portland City Council. "We wound up winning, but they had seven match points against us."

Lee's greatest weapon was his volley, which he used to perfection in doubles.

"Sam was 6-2, with really long reach," said Jim Flynn, former tennis director for Portland Parks & Recreation. "In doubles, you couldn't hit it by him. When Sam Lee was your partner, you weren't supposed to lose."

Like his volley, Flynn said, "Sam's style in talking and writing was precise, clear and accurate, with no extra motion. I

never saw Sam angry or complaining. He gave more of his time volunteering than anyone I've known. He and Mike Tichy, my coach (at the University of Portland), are the best guys I ever knew."

Flynn and Lee were instrumental in construction of the first public indoor tennis courts on the West Coast at the Portland Tennis Center in 1973.

"I call it 'The House That Sam Built,'" Flynn says.

Lee came to Portland in 1935 to take a warehouse job. He finished his professional career as president of Schmitt Forge, a custom manufacturing company that built, among other things, parts for Boeing.

"We were all respectful of Sam," said Gary Johnson, a former employee at Schmitt Forge. "His management style and strategy were representative of an engineer. Sam did it his way, and we were glad he did."

Lee had a tennis court in the backyard of his Portland home. On weekends, Hall and Flynn

were among the many friends who played doubles there, "followed by beer on the patio," Flynn said.

Years ago, the board of directors at The Irvington Club nominated him as an honorary member, meaning he was no longer obligated to pay monthly fees.

"He told us, 'I can't accept that. I want to continue to pay my dues,'" Hall said. "A couple of years later, we told him he had to accept."

Hal Lee recalls family badminton games during his youth at the MAC Club in weekends.

"They were very competitive, but with a lot of laughter," Lee said. "He made us work for every point. He ran us ragged and would usually finish us off with — what else? — a perfectly placed volley."

Almost to the end, as his health finally deserted him, Lee retained his mental faculties.

"We last talked six weeks before he died," Flynn said, "and he was sharp as the dickens."

In his latter years, Lee had

weekly lunch dates with one of his granddaughters, Rachel Knope.

"Our last one was five days before he passed away," Knope said. "He was just like always, in high spirits. We still shared the same jokes at the end of the lunch: 'Should we eat lunch again? Is it too early for dinner?'"

"I'll always remember him for his integrity, his character, his honesty and his zest for life. He had a way about him that made you want to be around him."

Lee made a lot of friends in his 97 years. He made a lot of contributions, too.

"He was as good a citizen as Portland has had in the last 75 years," Flynn said.

Sam Lee left a legacy, but I'm thinking it was more important to him that he left a great family and a lot of friends.

"I think he would look back and say, 'It's been a good life,'" Hal Lee said. "It's reassuring to know Dad really did have a good life."