



A Tradition of Tennis

AT MOUNTAIN LAKE PARK

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For almost a century, the game of tennis has been a major player in the history of the Mountain Lake Park community near Oakland, Maryland. Visitors to the town's official Web site will find a photo of the Mountain Lake Park Tennis Club sign featured prominently on the home page. Those who arrive in person will find the Club's distinctive clay courts located right next to the Town Hall, once a part of the original tennis club house. Currently the club has use of the Town Hall basement as its club house, in perpetuity. A tennis fan himself, the town's current mayor, Leo Martin, has offered assistance with renovations to the current club house and arranged to have the Town Hall wall facing the courts painted dark green so that players would not be distracted by excessive glare. It's all about supporting the Mountain Lake Park tennis tradition.

The Club has long drawn loyal generations of tennis players from near and far to Mountain Lake Park for "Tennis Week," officially known as the Western Maryland Tennis Championship. Now approaching its 89th birthday in August 2010, the Championship is the oldest United States Tennis Association's (USTA) tournament in

the Tri-State area. The Tournament has been played continuously since 1910, with the exception of brief periods during the two World Wars.

To understand tennis at Mountain Lake Park, it's helpful to know something about the town's origins. Founded in 1881 by businessmen and Methodist clergy from Wheeling, West Virginia, Mountain Lake Park flourished until the end of World War I as a "mountain Chataqua," where families came during the summer to enjoy wholesome cultural and religious activities. Activities like gambling, dancing, playing cards and drinking alcohol were prohibited.

"They had prohibition before prohibition," quips Jack Jones, a Club member who wears several hats as tennis instructor and caretaker of the Club's clay courts. Those looking for livelier action in those days could visit the Loch Lynn Hotel, literally on the other side of the tracks. A saying popular at the time summed it up: "If you want to sin, go to Loch Lynn; but for Jesus' sake, come to Mountain Lake."

Fortunately, as things turned out, tennis was on the list of approved activities. *It's Tennis We Came to Play for*

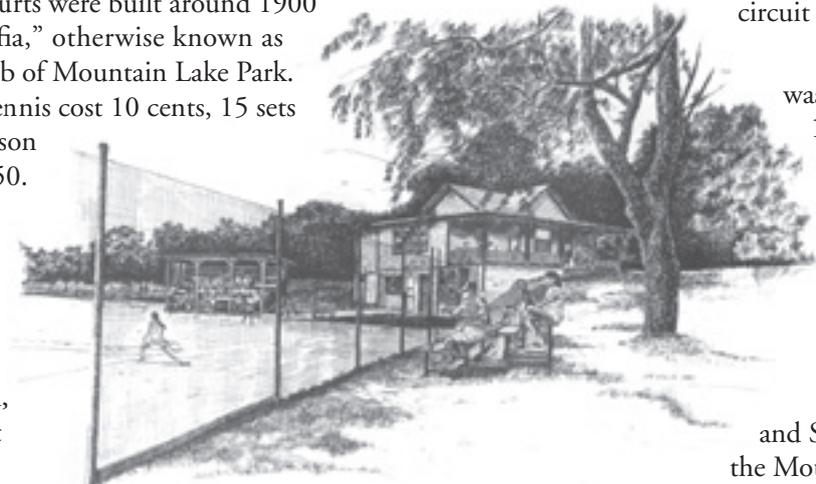
75 Years: A history, of sorts, of the Western Maryland Tennis Tournament upon the occasion of its Diamond Anniversary, August 1996 regales the reader with a lively account, arranged by decade, of the Club's colorful history. Writer and editor Katharine L. Smith worked with Club members to create what she describes as an historical pictorial. An introductory essay, "A Retrospective of the Early Years" by Earle Palmer Browne, presents "a stream of unconsciousness" selection of musings regarding boat rides, games, food, music, club meetings, notable attire, anecdotes, antics, in-jokes, accomplishments and such, and, of course, the game itself.

The story begins with "How It All Started: 1908-1919 or Little Old Ladies Without Tennis Shoes but with Punch, Wafers and Determination." According to this account, the first three tennis courts were built around 1900 by the "Mountain Mafia," otherwise known as the Women's Civic Club of Mountain Lake Park. Back then, one set of tennis cost 10 cents, 15 sets went for a \$1 and a season ticket set you back \$2.50.

During the 1920s, men "got into the act" and the Club obtained an official sanction from the United States Lawn Tennis Association, from which the current Championship later evolved. Events included Men's Singles and Doubles, and Mixed Doubles. In 1920, a youthful Jennings Randolph, later a West Virginia Senator, was an early entrant. He returned 50 years later to celebrate the Championship's Golden Anniversary. Women's Singles and Doubles were added in 1922. By 1927, there were 76 male entrants and 21 women, who arrived from Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Chicago and Cumberland, primarily by train. Comments on the 1926 Tournament from Paul Sullivan, sports editor of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, reflect the spirit of the "Roaring 20s": "The seventh annual Western Maryland tennis championships...have proven unquestionably the most successful net events in local history.... The tournament has offered competition both spirited and sensational."

The Club was tested in the 1930s by the Great Depression and the loss of tennis funds in a bank failure, but the indomitable Civic Club ladies prevailed, according to Finance Committee member Jared Young: "Nothing daunted the ladies. They merely tucked up their skirts, cut corners, ran the show on tick and actually ended up \$35 to the good." The account also notes, "The Tournament's social activities became almost as famous as the tennis."

The 1940s was marked by war-related challenges: "The clouds of World War II, gas rationing, and a scarcity of men reached the mountaintop." When the Civic Club's membership dwindled to 18, the ladies decided to "call it quits." Consequently there were no tournaments in 1942 or 1943. The ladies turned over their clubhouse, including a library and bowling alley, to the town of Mountain Lake Park. However, one forward-thinking lady, Miss Kate McLain, inserted a clause in the contract that would allow for the re-establishment of the Tournament, including the use of the club house and tennis courts during the duration of the event. In 1944, some newcomers – service men's wives and new summer residents – formed the Mountain Lake Tennis Club and held a war bond tournament. The Western Maryland Tournament became part of the Tri-State circuit by the end of the decade.



Although the Tournament was a washout in 1953, the 1950s were generally kind to the competition. During this period, "Tennis Week" eventually became a long weekend event. The popularity of water sports at nearby Deep Creek Lake, plus the 1954 debut of the Corn Roast and Saturday Night Dance at the Mountain Lake Park Hotel,

helped to attract new players to the courts. Many stayed at the Hotel, where off-the court player antics included "midnight kitchen raids, fireworks in the fireplaces, bowling balls descending the main staircase and chasing bats with racquets." Sadly, declining business forced the Hotel to close by the end of the decade. To safeguard the Tournament's future, a group of Club members pooled their resources in 1957 to form the Allegheny Corporation. They purchased three courts that were subsequently opened to the public.

During the Sixties, the Club continued to grow despite the loss of some of its most dedicated leaders, plus "Farmer" Rathbun, the "mountain man" who maintained the courts for years. A new generation of younger players took over. The 1964 purchase of property allowed for the construction of a fourth court and practice board behind the club house. After the Hotel's demise, the Saturday Night Dance flirted with various venues but finally was spurned in favor of a players' party held at Deep Creek Lake. A new form of recreation – skiing – was becoming very popular and played a key role in transforming the area into a four-season vacation destination.

Tradition and change continued its balancing act during the 1970s, with new events being added for the Club's "ageing stylists," players arriving from new areas,

and succeeding generations of former leaders taking on key responsibilities. The level of play improved with the arrival of younger and more highly skilled players. The nagging background issue of court ownership was finally resolved and a new constitution approved for the Club. College students took on the responsibility of maintaining the clay courts. Toward the end of the decade, the Tournament gained wider recognition when Eric Siegel of the *Baltimore Sun* wrote a feature story about “the area’s oldest continuous tennis tournament” that “has become a rather hallowed happening.”

The 1980s brought significant growth to the Mountain-top area. A new sewer system for the McHenry area and the completion of Interstate 68 spurred the expansion of recreational opportunities, especially around the Deep Creek Lake area. Besides Tournament tennis with friends old and new, players found plentiful activities like boating, golfing, camping and hiking to enjoy with their families and friends. The Tournament shifted to a four-day, Thursday through Sunday schedule to accommodate work schedules and the needs of two-income families. Because more full-time residents of Garrett County were becoming interested in tennis, a ladies’ league was created and improvements were made to the courts to improve playing conditions. It was a terrific time for tennis and the Tournament.

The final chapter of this retrospective describes the 1990s as a period of preparation for the 21st century “with longstanding traditions in updated fashion.” During much of its existence, the Tournament’s headquarters consisted of “the executive desk on the porch” of the Town Hall Building. But in 1989, the town needed the porch area for the expansion of its business office and so new headquarters were needed. Local sports aficionado Brad Stewart of the Stewart Funeral Home came to the rescue by setting up a tent on the lawn for the Tournament’s operations and thus a new tradition was born. Fortunately, modern technology in the form of cell phones allowed Tournament coordinators to maintain contact with players from the new tent HQ. Improvements to the tennis facilities included a new sign proclaiming, “Mountain Lake Park Tennis Club: Recreation and Competition Since 1895,” plus repositioned steps to the courts and new landscaping.

The saga continues into the 21st century as club members continue a legacy of court care, tennis play, friendship and just plain fun. Enhancements to the club house include ladies’ and gents’ restrooms, two refrigerators for cold drinks and sundry snacks, and ample space to relax. Hanging on the walls are framed listings of tournament winners, with records beginning in 1915.

Jack Jones makes sure that the clay courts are properly rolled and treated with calcium chloride to help retain adequate moisture for optimal play. Starting in 2001, he spent four years digging a ditch – by hand – around the



Jack Jones, Director Member, grew up on the courts in Mountain Lake Park, and is still providing us with his humor and presence, kicking up the clay.

entire court area and then filling it in with stones to alleviate drainage problems. Any excess dirt in the ditches is recycled.

“I’ve come full circle,” Jack says, recalling his days as a ball boy at age 8. “Earle (author of the *Retrospective’s* introduction) gave me my first tennis racquet.” Now retired from Marvin’s Men’s Wear in Oakland, Jack is certified by the United States Professional Tennis Association as a tennis instructor.

The tradition continues this summer with the upcoming Western Maryland Tennis Tournament, scheduled from Thursday, August 5 through Sunday, August 8, 2010. Entries are due by Tuesday, August 3. The Club encourages players of all levels to sign up. With 17 divisions of competition and participants from amateur to nationally ranked, the Tournament offers options for play at any level. A grandstand offers shaded seating for spectators. Information and entry forms are available on the Club’s Web site: <http://www.mlptc.org/>.

Social events include the President’s Reception on Thursday evening and the ever-popular Corn Roast on Friday at 8 p.m. While enjoying the season’s bounty – especially the locally grown sweet corn – players, family and friends can relax to music, mingle, and swap stories. It’s all part of a tradition of tennis, blending competition with fun and friendship as it approaches its centennial year.