

History of the Dundas Tennis Club

Good-evening everyone. The Dundas Tennis Club celebrates its ninetieth anniversary this year. Several of us thought this would be a good time to put together a short history of the club to mark the occasion. I have had access to many old (as in late 1800s and on) newspaper clippings, thanks to the efforts of Larry Sagar. He kindly shared his discoveries with the club, and it was fascinating see how popular tennis was as far back as the late 1800s. I have also been able to talk with Pearl Moore and Ann Parker, both of whom were long-time Dundas Tennis Club members as well as past presidents of the club. Pearl and Ann, and their husbands are here tonight—thank you so much for coming out!

Every time I come out here to play I look around at the beautiful setting of the Dundas Driving Park. The pines and maples surrounding the court, the nearby hills, and the large sky above us. We are lucky to play in such a place. Even if my game has gone badly I still feel the time here has been well spent, because I have been in the park. This park is therapeutic! And the wonderful game of tennis is even more so! It brings people together and life-long friendships are formed on the courts. Young or old—all can enjoy the game, and we all know how beneficial exercise is. Team spirit is developed and fair play encouraged. And if you've had a bad day you can hit the ball extra hard and get rid of your frustration...

Tennis was popular in Dundas in the late 1800s and the Dundas newspaper frequently notes lawn tennis being played on properties in Dundas, at homes or on lots adjacent to churches. In fact in 1899 there were friendly competitions being held between the Dundas and Grimsby teams....that would have been a long drive!

At that time, tennis was a sport enjoyed by the wealthy, who had the time and means to socialize in this way. Around the turn of the century permission was granted for courts to be made in the Dundas Driving Park, and the first courts were located in the cove. The Dundas Driving Park was privately owned property in the early 1800s, and a harness racetrack was added in the 1860s. In 1886 the town of Dundas purchased the land for \$3500.00 to be used as a public park. After a bandstand, a

grandstand and a wading pool were added in the early 1900s, the park was given a grand entrance with the stone gates donated by Col. J.J. Grafton in 1911.

For use of the courts the club had to pay rent to the Parks Board.

It wasn't until 1924 that the Dundas Tennis Club was officially formed and the first minutes written. That old black ledger still exists in the Dundas Museum. The members met with the Parks Committee in the Library basement, and a membership fee was established at \$5.00 per year. The courts in the park had no clubhouse, but a ramshackle structure stood adjacent to court 3, and was used for changing one's clothes. A clothesline with sheets hung over it served as a "wall" between the women's side and the men's side.

Tennis in the cove was very hot, as it was enclosed on 3 sides, and eventually the courts were moved to their present location—where the air flow is indeed better but the drainage is poor! The courts were clay, and regularly had to be weeded and rolled, but great use was made of them. In fact, so popular was tennis that a gong system was employed to kick players off the courts after 20 minutes, to allow all a chance to play! Many newspaper articles in the 1930s record competitive results, and it is clear that the Dundas tennis players were a talented bunch. The challenge board system was used then, and the top 6 players on the board were picked for the Interurban League and the Hamilton District League.

Eighty-five year old Pearl Moore was one of those talented members. At age 17 she joined the tennis club, encouraged to do so by John Picone. They would practice hitting, and she hasn't forgotten his teaching: "Don't be afraid to hit the balls—they're not eggs!" This advice was taken to heart, and she became a good player. Still, she was intimidated by high-calibre players such as Jim Mullins, whom she was partnered with once in a mixed doubles tournament. Jim was an excellent tennis player, and he usually teamed with Shirley, but this time Pearl had to step in. It was an unnerving experience. Jim ran all over the court, and Pearl was exasperated as he poached on her balls. Finally she asked him—"Look, just where do you want me to be?" She has never forgotten his reply: "Just serve and get the hell off the court!"

At another time with a different partner she again had an unforgettable encounter. In Waterloo, Tony Dreyfuss, the captain, decided to pair Pearl together with Wilf

Parker. "I don't know what he was thinking," says Pearl, "we were both left-handed and had never played together before." It did not go well, and as the match went on it was clear that Wilf was getting frustrated. "Never mind, Wilf," said Pearl, "just look at the beautiful moon tonight!" Wilf gritted his teeth. "Get your mind off the bloody moon and keep your eye on the ball!" he growled.

By the late 1930s the shack was falling apart and fund-raising began for a new clubhouse. This was a huge undertaking; it was wartime, and money was scarce. To raise money Jamborees were held in the park, popular all day events with parades, bands, races, prizes for best-decorated bicycles or doll-carriages, and beauty contests. The first beauty contest ended in controversy. The prize of a gold wristwatch was to be given to the most beautiful girl in Dundas. She would be judged on her personality, poise, style of attire and physical charm, by means of the applause meter. Unfortunately the winner, Mrs. Betty Fletcher, turned out to be from Hamilton! A few Dundas girls had entered, but apparently the choice was too limited...That year's Jamboree raised \$670.00, enough for the plumbing of the new clubhouse. In another fund-raising effort, the tennis club put on a play at the local high school, called "True Colors". It was a big hit, and quite professional. Can you see us doing something like that now?? Maybe if we offered Frank the starring role? The point is, the tennis spirit was strong, and funds for the club house were slowly raised by dedicated club members.

Pearl Moore remembers going to Toronto together with Harry Fry to try to get funding. It turned out they were eligible for more than they requested, but the Parks Board was somewhat miffed that they had taken this upon themselves without the Board's consent. Pearl worked at Graftons, and knew many of the Dundas merchants. She bravely solicited the Dundas merchants for loans for the clubhouse, because as she puts it, she was "sold on her cause". She vividly remembers Mr. Snetsinger from the Lumber Yard writing her a check for \$200.00, and telling her it was "not subject to return". In 1950 the clubhouse was completed, and it would stand until 1978. Older members remember the knothole in the wall between the ladies and men's rooms—many of the guys peered through that hole, hoping to see

more than they saw on the courts! In the late 1960s the club had an old caretaker, responsible for upkeep and maintenance. But it turned out he was living there, unbeknownst to the club, and actually running a little business!

Tennis was extremely popular in the 1960s and 1970s and the Dundas Tennis Club was making a name for itself. It won the Hamilton and District Championships five years in the time period between 1965 and 1975. The junior membership was large and the junior program very well run, under the leadership of Blanche Badenhorst. Later, Doug Dittmer would take over this role, and eventually became a well-known doctor of sports medicine. But the clubhouse that was erected by the dedicated members in the 1950s was clearly becoming too small—it had been built for a membership of 200—the membership was now over 600! *And* there were still hundreds of people interested in joining the tennis club. One of the solutions the club and town came up with was to create extra courts at local schools, by painting lines on the concrete school playgrounds. Ann Parker was instrumental in having the tennis courts constructed at Highland Secondary School, submitting newspaper articles, meeting with councilors, writing to the Parks and Recreation Board—in short, spending many hours trying to make the sport she so passionately believed in available to all. In 1974 courts 4 and 5 were added to the club, with the idea of “pay as you play”, to raise the money to cover the costs. This was the Parks and Recreation committee’s idea, but it didn’t work out very well. It cost 75 cents for an hour of play, and the money was to go to the cost of constructing the courts. Anne remembers seeing the councilors whose brainwave this was playing there more than anyone!

While there were now enough courts, the clubhouse desperately needed replacing. Many meetings took place between the DTC and the Parks and Recreation committee, and over the course of 4 years Anne Parker continued to actively lobby for a loan and a Wintario grant. Huge amounts of red tape had to be cut through before a loan could be granted from the Royal Bank of Canada, but eventually it was accomplished. A Wintario grant to the tune of \$10,000 dollars was finally secured.

Anne Parker had been working on the plans for the new clubhouse (she had trained as a nurse and midwife but also loved architecture) and she finally had the drawings done, keeping the club house simple, functional and spacious. Imagine the club’s

surprise when they were told by the city that an architect had been hired to do the drawings! Unfortunately, the drawings were not suitable. The clubhouse the architect drew up was small, fancy and three times more than what they could afford. \$6000 dollars had to be found to pay him for his useless plans. Eventually the new club house was constructed to a cost of \$29,000. Ann was a woman of vision, and planned it with the possibility of having a bubble in the future, but it is unlikely that will ever happen with the proximity of the trees to the courts.

In the 1980s and 1990s the club continued to thrive, with a large junior membership. In 1995 and 1996 the DTC won the Ontario Tennis Association Junior Development Award, with at this time Mischa Mackesy in charge of Junior Development. The Junior team travelled throughout Ontario to partake in competition. After the turn of the millennium, however, it was clear that tennis was decreasing in popularity. The executive focused on strategies to encourage enrollment and participation, yet junior membership numbers dropped. However, there remained a large core of adult members, still there for the love of the game. And as always, there is a dedicated and hard-working executive, volunteering their time for the betterment of the club. The cost of re-surfacing the courts is prohibitive, yet that, in conjunction with the city, has been accomplished a few years ago. Modernization in the form of online booking and swipe cards for the gate are the latest changes brought in, and recently the clubhouse has had a beautiful makeover. This century will no doubt bring new challenges to the club, but as long as there are people who love the game of tennis the Dundas Tennis Club will continue to thrive. For ninety years this club has officially been in existence, and for well over one hundred years tennis has been popular in Dundas. The world has changed, but the love of the game and all its benefits, has not. We'll be out here playing until we can't –and then we'll meet on the bowling green!