

History Of KZN Tennis

The Natal Tennis Association was founded in 1902 and as is the case with many other sporting codes in South Africa today the history of Natal Tennis is indeed the very history of South African tennis. The South African Lawn Tennis Union was founded in 1903. No one quite knows for sure how or exactly where the first game of tennis was played in Southern Africa but there is a strong suggestion that the place was somewhere in Natal and credited with the game beginning was a Mr. E. Nevill. The oldest club in the Country is the Richmond Tennis Club and came into being in 1877. Wimbledon also staged their first tournament in 1877. By 1881 tennis had become a major feature of colonial life in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. History records that in 1882 the Berea Tennis Club became the first club to be founded in Durban. The Durban Tennis Club followed in 1886. Mabel Grant a member of Berea Tennis Club became South Africa's first woman champion. She later married E. Nevill. The first ever Natal Champs were staged in Pietermaritzburg in 1884.

Since those early pioneering days, players from Natal have featured prominently in the history of the game; many of them now South African legends whose deeds both at home and overseas are equal to and in some cases even surpass those of today's jet age Springbok giants. One was Brian Norton who lived in Estcourt. He took British and European tennis by storm in the years immediately after World War I and his feats off the court during those gay days of the "roaring twenties" were as well known as his brilliant, if sometimes erratic; play on it. One of only three South African men to ever contest the final of one of the worlds four major tournaments, Norton stood on the threshold of immortality when at Wimbledon in 1921 he had the man still reckoned to be one of the greatest players of them all Big Bill Tilden, the defending champion by two sets to love, 5-4 and 40-30 and blew it. The second to reach a singles final was Eric Sturgess and the last up to 1977 was Ian Vermaak also from Natal.

A feature of the National and international championships produced by Natal was that many of them came from the County Districts.

As impressive as the Natal men may have been the Provinces women players also played a prominent role in our tennis history, none more

so than the legendary Bobbie Heine Miller – she hailed from Winterton in the Natal Midlands and became the Natal senior champion at 15, the South African champion at 18 and at 19 was ranked 7th in the world. It took one of the greatest woman players of all time - Helen Wills Moody of America to halt the young South African's determined bid for the Wimbledon crown. She was part of the glory years, the golden years of Natal tennis which she shared with two others – Billie Tapscott and Margaret Morphey. Between Miller and Tapscott they dominated South African women's tennis to such an extent that only twice in the period from 1928 to 1939 did either one fail to win the national singles crown.

Natal went through a lean period in womens tennis until along came Renee Schuurman in the 1950's followed by Greer Stevens from Pietermaritzburg in the 1970's. Destined never to win a singles title despite reaching the Wimbledon semi-finals in 1962 Renee was the one half of the famous South African tennis twins who repeatedly made world headlines in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Renee and Sandra Reynolds from Bloemfontein were two of the most popular players in world tennis for nearly 10 years, during which they held the South African doubles titles three times, French Open three times and runners-up at Wimbledon in 1960 and 1962.

There were other Natal Springboks among them Nigel Cockburn (1949) Bryan Woodroffe (1953) Gaeton Koenig (1960) Keith Diepraam (1963) and Pat Cramer (1972). Apart from Renee, Natal has produced but 3 women Springboks since the golden era of the 1930's. They are Maryna Godwin (1969) now married to cricketer Mike Proctor, Laura Roussouw (1971) and Greer Stevens (1976).

But if Natal was the launching pad in South Africa for a game that over the next 100 years was to become the most international of all sport, Natal is also recognized as the province that has played probably the most significant role of all in establishing the game as one of the four major sports in South Africa today. Thanks to the efforts of its many far-sighted officials over the past 75 years, it was Natal who pressed for and established the South African senior inter-provincial tournaments and Natal again who launched the South African junior championships and the inter-provincial event.

Those seeking the true story behind South Africa's rise to its present ranking as one of the top five nations in both men's and women's

tennis in the world , need look no further than Natal in the early 1960's. With the generous help of the South African Sugar Industry, the idea of the Sugar Circuit was conceived and launched. This was the breeding ground for all our currently world ranked players.

An annual Open tournament was held in July, 1908 at Berea and Mitchell Park Tennis Clubs and attracted 52 men for the singles, 30 ladies for the singles, 30 couples for the mens doubles, 35 couples for the mixed and 24 couples for the ladies doubles. They also held singles and doubles handicap events.

Maritzburg County Districts held their first Annual Open tournament in May, 1915 at the Recreation Grounds (Umsindusi River) (Boshoff Street South Extension) (9 courts) with 11 events and the entry fees ranged 3/6d for singles and 7/- for doubles. Junior paid 2/6d and even as far back as 1915 only registered players of affiliated clubs were allowed to enter.

I also came across a report of a Council meeting held in Durban on 21st July, 1911 reporting on the popularity of the game in Natal. They used to get entries of 475 for their tournaments and great interest was shown by spectators as well.

As far back at 1903 the Shield competition was played with Berea Tennis Club and Maritzburg City dominating the men's and ladies "A" Shield.

Wouldn't it be great to have that enthusiasm and entries back in the 21st Century. Their membership figures were around the six thousand mark and carried up right until about 10 years ago when numbers, especially in the Country Districts started to dwindle.