Bob Sassano pioneered Florida’s tennis program in the 1970s and made his mark coaching juniors.

Tennis Trailblazer

Coach Ran Celebrity Tournaments, Developed Junior Program

By Amy Morgan

It’s a rare privilege to get in on the ground floor of a new trend. Trailblazers like Bob Sassano are a special breed. Bob pioneered Florida’s tennis program in the 1970s. He was such an important player the United States Tennis Association recognized him with a Tennis Education Merit Award for his contribution to the game in 1976. Among his accomplishments, raising $384,000 for junior tennis in the Florida Keys.

Bob made his mark coaching juniors “When you work with young players, it is a four-year project. There is no end to the ability for improvement,” he said. He loves that tennis is an “honest game” that exposes a player’s talent and dedication. “You can’t just show up and play a little to make an impact.”

Bob was brilliant at developing talent and motivating kids to excel in a way that was challenging yet inspirational. His skills were put to good use with his own family members, all of whom contributed in various ways to the tennis programs he ran. In fact, Bob’s most cherished memories are of his family playing and embracing the sport together. His daughter Lisa was named an All-American tennis player at Trinity University in 1985 and currently coaches the tennis team at Saint Mary’s Hall. His son Michael was ranked 200th in the world. Daughter Susan modeled the tennis fashions and joined his wife running the pro shop. Son JB helped maintain the tennis courts.

“It was a family affair,” he said. “We worked together for 30 years in one capacity or another, starting when the children were still in school. If you have an occupation you love, you are never really working a day in your life. And if your family is involved, it is that even more rewarding,” Bob added.

Over the course of his decades-long tennis career in Florida, Bob ran leagues, taught lessons and put together celebrity tournaments, rubbing elbows with the likes of Chris Evert and Bjorn Borg. The star-studded events were the biggest in the business. Jackie Gleason, Sonny Bono, Lloyd Bridges and Linda Carter were those who lent their names to high profile tournaments. Sometimes Bob was able to play a match as well as coordinate. He proudly displays his finalist trophy from the 1982 Linda Evans Bonaventure Inter-Continental Celebrity Pro-Am in his home at Independence Hill Retirement Community. His corner apartment is filled with memorabilia from tennis and travel, along with a restored player piano and his collection of instrument-quality harmonicas.

Bob wrests great musical tonality from the harmonica, playing a moving rendition of “How Great Thou Art” for church services at Independence Hill. He often accompanied the choir at St. Justin’s Catholic Church in Key Largo, where his late wife of almost 66 years, Shirley, also worked. Recently, he played “Ave Maria” at St. Bernadette’s Cathedral in Lourdes, France, on a trip with the Knights of Malta.

Bob offered his coaches’ expertise about the difference between an expert versus one who is merely “good.” Whether instruments or sport, “a good player plays until he gets it right, the expert plays until he can’t get it wrong.”

“I hope I can play as well on God’s court as we did on the other court,” he said.

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