Bob Ryland Opens Up at National Public Parks

New Yorker Bob Ryland played a starring role for Eastern tennis this past June in the 80th annual National Public Parks tournament at the USTA National Tennis Center in Flushing, N.Y. Ryland, who learned the game in public parks, defeated Flushing’s Ted Zoob — the country’s top-ranked player in the men’s 90s division — 6-4, 3-0 ret., to win the men’s 85 singles title.

More than 1,200 players — ranging in age from the junior 10s to the 85 super seniors — competed in 60 events at the National Tennis Center, home of the U.S. Open and the country’s largest public tennis site. Other Eastern headliners included world and national senior champs Tony Franco and Bob Litwin, but perhaps the tournament’s most compelling story belonged to Ryland, 86, an optimistic cancer survivor who still plays tennis daily in New York City’s public parks.

“I have had cancer for 11 years but it is stabilized,” Ryland explained, while reminiscing about his 75-year tour of the world’s tennis courts. “I am on a strict diet and use alternative medicine, which helps me healthy.”

Ryland was the first African-American to play professional tennis. The promoter Jack March recruited him in the 1950s, when tennis was still an amateur sport, to join the World Pro Tour and compete with Lew Hoad, Pancho Gonzales and Don Budge. It would be another decade before the onset of the Open Era in 1968, with amateurs and pros competing in the same events. Ryland was also the first African-American to compete in the NCAA Championships, the first to lead his team to the small college national championships as a player-coach, and the first to play at the prestigious Los Angeles Tennis Club.

Ryland has coached some of the world’s top-ranked professionals, among them Harold Solomon, Renee Blount and Leslie Allen. In the early 1960s, he taught tennis to government VIPs Robert MacNamara and members of the Kennedy family in Washington, D.C. Later, he taught celebrities Barbra Streisand, Bill Cosby, Tony Bennett, Mike Wallace and Eartha Kitt at the Midtown Tennis Club in Manhattan, where he worked from 1963 to 1990.

“Bob’s name would have been right up there with the great players of his time — Hoad, Gonzales, Budge, Bobby Riggs and the rest — had he not been born a black man in America,” Allen has said. “Still, he endured and succeeded in a sport that was not inviting. We can appreciate his accomplishments and, for generations to come, learn from his experiences.”

Born in 1920, the son of an African-America mother and an Irish-Indian father, Ryland learned early to cope silently with the indignities he suffered during his cross-country travels. He was hauled into police stations and ordered to fork over hundreds of dollars — just because he was driving a Cadillac — and forced to sneak in and out of back doors to compete in college tennis matches. He emphasizes, however, that those experiences paled compared to the shock of regularly seeing people of color strung up on trees during his early childhood in Mobile, Ala. When you witness that kind of horror or feel the jolt of a policeman pulling you into harm’s way for no reason, he said, living with fear becomes a way of life. “You’re scared to death, but you have no choice, you just go through it.”

Ryland long ago adopted a philosophical view of his heritage. “When you’re part black and part white you can deal better with prejudice,” he says. “You know everybody’s the same. But you don’t understand that unless you have to deal with the reality of racism.”

Ryland lived in Mobile with his grandmother for a few years after his mother died and helped pick cotton for the family with his great grandfather, who had been a slave. He returned to his Chicago roots at age 10 and began playing tennis with his father in the public park. From the early 1930s until the mid-50s, he was twice the American Tennis Association (ATA) national singles champ and three times the runner-up, during which time he also embarked on a 15-year journey in search of a college degree.

In 1939, he was a student at Tilden Tech High School, won both the Illinois State and junior ATA singles titles and earned a tennis scholarship to Xavier University in New Orleans. “The nuns bought us a station wagon and the five of us [teammates] would travel all over the country playing,” he said. Ryland left school for a stint in the U.S. Army, from 1941 to 1945, and played tournaments and exhibitions with Alice Marble, Mary Hardwicke and Dr. Reggie Weir at the Cosmopolitan Club in Harlem. In 1946, he won public parks events in New Jersey and New York and accepted another tennis scholarship, this time to Wayne University in Detroit. He broke the color barrier that year at the NCAA Championships, advancing to the singles semifinals before losing to USC’s Bob Faulkenburg (a future Wimbledon singles champ). Ryland was later inducted into the university’s hall of fame.

In 1947, he again abandoned academics and headed for California. He worked nights in the post office and played tennis with Gonzales during the day. He broke the color barrier at the Los Angeles Tennis Club, losing there in the Pacific Southwest Championships, 6-4, 7-5, to Ham Richardson, the country’s No. 1 player at the time.

In 1954, Tennessee A&I in Nashville offered Ryland a scholarship to be the player-coach, and he twice led his team to the small college national championships, with help from his New York recruits Vernon Morgan and Billy Davis. He left Tennessee with his bachelor’s degree, came to New York and qualified for the 1955 U.S. Championships at Forest Hills.

Ryland worked as the physical education director of the YMCA in Montclair, N.J., but by 1957 he opted to teach tennis and joined the U.S. Professional (Lawn) Tennis Association. In 1973, the comedian Bill Cosby asked him to accompany him around the world so Cosby could improve his game. A decade later, Allen asked him to tour Europe with her while she was playing the women’s pro circuit. “Bob built the foundation for my game,” she has said. “He took me from a teenager dreaming about the pros right to center court at Wimbledon.”
EASTERN DOMINATES IN SINGLES AT PUBLIC PARKS

Joining Ryland in the winner’s circle at the USTA National Public Parks tournament were seventeen Eastern players who captured singles titles in their individual age divisions or in the Level 1 junior contests. Standouts included 2005 champions Franco and Litwin, who won also won in their divisions this year, and Zoe Pangalos, the girls’ 14 victor who was also honored with the Gerald Perry Sportsmanship award.

MEN’S:
80s: Tony Franco of Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.
70s: Ron Owens, Wayne, N.J.
65s: Lou Monte, Lloyd Harbor, N.Y.
55s: Bob Litwin, Glenwood Landing, N.Y.
50s: Kevin Kane, Goldens Bridges, N.Y.

WOMEN’S:
70s: Cynthia Vernet, Brooklyn, N.Y.
65s: Joan Nevins, Forest Hills, N.Y.
55s: Judith Lehman, Brooklyn, N.Y.
40s: Ellen Markowitz, East Norwich, N.Y.

LEVEL 1 JUNIOR CHAMPIONS:
Boys’ 18: Wilder Sampson, Rumson, N.J.
Boys’ 16: Quinton Vega, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Boys’ 14: Henry Steer, Bernardsville, N.J.
Boys’ 12: Alan Pleat, Roslyn, N.Y.
Girls’ 16: Angelina Dabu, Jersey City, N.J.
Girls’ 14: Zoe Pangalos, New York, N.Y.
Girls’ 12: Vanessa Pavia, Thornwood, N.Y.
Girls’ 10: Paulina Tafler, Oceanside, N.Y.

MAYOR’S CUP EMPHASIZES VALUE OF TENNIS IN SCHOOLS

In the June finals of the Mayor’s Cup All-Scholastic Tennis Championships, held annually at the USTA National Tennis Center in Flushing, Shinann Featherston of St. Francis Prep overwhelmed Katarina Kovacevic of Forest Hills High School, 6-0, 6-1, to capture the girls’ varsity singles title. Michael Moore of the Beacon School defeated his teammate Milo Hauk, 2-6, 6-2, 7-5, in the boys’ varsity title match.

In the final round of varsity team competition, Brooklyn Tech edged Horace Mann, 3-2, in the the boys’ event, while the St. Francis Prep girls’ squad routed Cardozo, 5-0.

The Mayor’s Cup Committee named the following players to the annual All-Star team:

GIRLS’ VARSITY
1. Shinann Featherston, St. Francis Prep
2. Nadejda Demidenko, Poly Prep
3. Hannah Berner, Poly Prep
4. Alison Campatiello, Staten Island Tech
5. Jillian Santos, Benjamin Cardozo
6. Martina Featherston, St. Francis Prep
7. Kathrin Sorokko, St. Francis Prep
8. Evgenia Kim, Benjamin Cardozo
9. Katarina Kovecich, St. Francis Prep
10. Veronica Li, Stuyvesant H.S.

BOYS’ VARSITY
1. Alex Markovich, New Utrecht H.S.
2. Coleman Crutchfield, Riverdale Country Day School
3. Imran Choudhury, The Beacon School
4. Andre Vorobyov, Brooklyn Tech
5. Michael Moore, The Beacon School
6. Milo Hauk, The Beacon School
7. Jai Yoon, Benjamin Cardozo
8. Alex Vasin, Brooklyn Tech
9. Alex Aksanov, Midwood H.S.
10. Rajeev Deb-Sen, Horace Mann

NEW COURTS DEBUT AT RIVERBANK STATE PARK

Representatives from the USTA Eastern Section and Bernadette Castro, commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, joined state and local officials at a July 11 ribbon cutting ceremony to formally open four refurbished tennis courts that were recently completed at Riverbank State Park in New York City. Eastern presented Commissioner Castro with a check for $39,453.31 as a grant toward the new courts.

“We are thrilled at this partnership between the USTA and the Riverbank State Park,” said D.A. Abrams, Eastern’s executive director and COO. “These refurbished courts will open playing opportunities for … the very diverse population served by this wonderful site. We look forward to a relationship that develops a pathway for tennis activities that will benefit the beginner as well as the seasoned player. It is a win-win for all involved.”

Joining the Riverbank celebration were: (l-r) Mary Ellen Kris, asst. deputy commissioner, N.Y.C. Region of N.Y. State Parks; D.A. Abrams; Arvelia Myers, Riverbank tennis director; L. Ann Rocker, president, Friends of Riverbank State Park (holding the check); Parks’ promoters Pia Lindstrom, Cynthia Wainwright and Judy Kudlow; Ed Cox, chairman, N.Y. State Council of Parks and N.Y.C. Commission; and Bernadette Castro.

September 2006 TW 91

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