The historical development of population centers is an interesting study in contrast. A large number of cities owe their location, settlement and prosperity to geographic features like mountain passes, river junctions, inlets and protected harbors. Many other cities come to prosperity near transportation hubs or in proximity to industrial, production or manufacturing centers. Few cities, however, owe their existence to conceptual forethought, deliberate site selection, thoughtful planning and carefully orchestrated development. That was typical of the comprehensive planning that went into International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) Corporation’s decision to acquire a 70 percent stake in Levitt and Sons, a community development company, and Rayonier Corporation, owners of more than a million acres of land, 65,000 of it here in northern Florida.

The Palm Coast we live in today is a unique community because it was initially based on a planned vision of “the perfect place to live.” This vision was publicly voiced on June 16, 1969, at Princess Place before 175 county and state officials, guests and members of the press. Dr. Norman Young, spokesperson for ITT/Levitt and Sons, made an announcement, “of great importance to all of Flagler County....” He went on to explain that ITT/Levitt was determined “to incorporate and merge the beautiful, balanced, and diverse environment that already existed in the area with the recreational interests

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of its prospective residents.” Inherent in that plan was Dr. Young’s intention to build the new community of Palm Coast around the recreational amenities of tennis, golf and water sports. These three amenities were also intended to serve as magnets to attract potential residents and investors. And magnets they were. Potential residents and investors flocked to the area; they purchased land and built homes as Palm Coast became one of the fastest-growing communities in America. And true to his vision, Dr. Young established the guiding principle for community development that would eventually give rise to the Golden Age of Tennis in Palm Coast.

Within a year, ITT/Levitt completed the first building, the Welcome Center with its 64-foot tower, and soon after two tennis courts were built nearby next to the parking lot just off what would eventually become Clubhouse Drive. By September 1971, the first nine holes of a golf course were opened to residents, followed by the original yacht club at the marina, two additional tennis courts and a swim club located near the intersection of the Intracoastal Waterway and the main canal. During the pioneering stages of community development, the tennis facility played a crucial role by providing a social hub, a center where new residents from diverse localities could first begin to make new friends, bond and develop a sense of community spirit. ITT/CDC wisely promoted access to this popular amenity on billboards and in printed advertisements using the provocative slogan, “Love is a big thing in Palm Coast.”

By October of 1974, with only 850 residents, this new-found community spirit became apparent when tennis players decided to enter the First Annual Regional Life and Breath Tennis Tournament. Participation in this fund raising activity established a tradition of community service that players continue to support to this day.

Two months later, this community spirit inspired tennis players to join together to form the Palm Coast Tennis Association. Participation on the tennis courts and membership in the new association grew rapidly.

By early 1976, there were over 1500 residents in Palm Coast; the courts at the yacht club had become so over-crowded that the Tennis Association began urging the corporation to expand the facilities. Agreeing that there was a need, Alan Smolen, new President of ICDC, approved construction of four new courts, resurfaced the original two and added a pro shop and lights for night play. The facility was renamed the Palm Harbor Tennis Club. Leon Aragon was hired as the pro and a fee-for-play was established. For the official dedication of the new facility on May 15, 1978, Tom and Tim Gullikson were invited to play in an exhibition match. Shortly thereafter, ICDC
decided to hire Tom as the Palm Coast Tennis Pro when he was not actively participating on the professional players’ tour.

With this new facility, Dorothy Griffin, spokesperson for the Tennis Association, was able to enroll five women’s doubles teams to represent Palm Coast in the newly expanded Greater Volusia Tennis League, GVTL. The men’s teams joined the new league the following spring. In November 1978, Palm Coast women won their first league match against Ormond Hotel Racquet Club, marking the beginning of Palm Coast’s long and stellar record of play in the GVTL. Today, some 32 years later, over 40 teams representing the Greater Palm Coast area are competing in the league at a variety of skill and age levels. In the season just completed, 2009-2010, 43 men’s and women’s teams produced five division championships.

In the spring of 1980, ICDC completed and dedicated a recreational facility called the Belle Terre Swim and Racquet Club on the west side of I-95. The Belle Terre club included four tennis courts, a pool and a fitness center. With the earlier hiring of Tom Gullikson as a touring tennis pro, the eventual hiring of Jim Vidamour as director of tennis, and the addition of these four new tennis courts, the Golden Age of Tennis in Palm Coast was clearly advanced. The opening of the I-95 interchange in May 1981 brought accelerated growth to the community. As a result, demand for additional tennis facilities stimulated their inclusion in private communities like Fairways, Pine Lakes Village, Woodhaven, Plantation Bay, Matanzas Shores and Marina Cove as they were built out over the next 10 years.

When ICDC decided to build Hammock Dunes and its golf course and a toll bridge over the ICW, it required the dismantling of the oceanfront Sheraton Inn. This, in turn, required the construction of a new Sheraton Hotel on the site where the six tennis courts were then located. ICDC asked Tom Gullikson and Jim Vidamour to work with the corporation’s architects to plan and create a new world-class, multi-surface tennis facility – the Players Club. It opened to stellar reviews in 1986. And true to form, tennis players from all over came to play and train at this beautiful facility, including famous pros, the likes of Andre Agassi, Michael Chang, Monica Seles, Manuela Maleeva, Jimmy Connors, Todd Martin and Jim Courier, to name just a few.

Players had the option of playing on grass, clay or hard courts at a facility that featured two 400-seat stadium courts and a two-
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story, full-service clubhouse  
with a restaurant overlooking  
the grounds, all of it laid out on  
a beautifully landscaped site.  
In 1987, the Players Club won  
worldwide acclaim as one of a  
select handful of multi-surface  
facilities available to the serious  
tennis pro and novice alike. It  
also won an award as one of the  
ten best tennis facilities in the  
world. With  
the opening of the Players Club, the Golden Age of Tennis in Palm Coast was no longer an aspiration; it had become a reality. For the next eight years, with ITT’s support, the Players Club was home to social play among members, championship tournaments, spectacular exhibitions and fund-raising events that brought players together, national recognition to the community and prospective residents to Palm Coast.

Unfortunately, the national economic recession of the early 1990s and slumping sales for ICDC saw the reevaluation of ITT’s willingness to invest in further development of Palm Coast. As a result of financial pressure on the bottom-line, ITT began rethinking its larger corporate structure and reorganizing its conglomerate business model. Initially, these decisions forced ICDC to surrender its monopoly on and control of planned community development when it sold 13,000 acres of its land to Palm Coast Holdings. ITT also scaled back its plans for developing additional sections of Hammock Dunes and eventually sold the northern beachfront property. As a part of its downscaled commitment to development of the larger Palm Coast community, ICDC sought a delay in its plans for the River Club and the community’s fifth golf course. This project was eventually sold and renamed Grand Haven. By the middle of the ’90s, ITT had completely reorganized its corporate structure and had made a firm decision to divest itself of all its holdings in Palm Coast.

In February 1996, the Players Club, Belle Terre Swim and Racquet Club, the golf courses (except Grand Haven and Hammock Dunes), the Marina, and the Sheraton Hotel were all sold to a division of Lowe Enterprises called Destination Hotel and Resorts. Lowe decided to contract with the world renowned Peter Burwash International to assume management and operational control of the Players Club and brought in Dave Neuhart as head tennis professional. In his new capacity, Neuhart took over for the departing Jim Vidamour who resigned in September of 1996, after serving 15 years as director of tennis for the community. A year later, on September 13, 1997, Tom Gullikson ended his 17-year relationship with the tennis community in Palm Coast. With the loss of the guiding influence of these two men and the sale of Palm Coast’s amenities, the facilities were separated from the community’s assets and the role they played as unifying social hubs ceased to exist. Too few in positions of leadership seemed to fully appreciate the eventual impact that this sale would have on residents’ quality of life and the overall unifying vision that, up to that point, had guided development of Palm Coast. ITT’s decision to divest itself of its holdings and leave the community marked the beginning of the unraveling of the Golden Age of Tennis in Palm Coast.

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by George A. Libonate Jr.

The management of Lowe Enterprises quickly made the decision that the Belle Terre Swim and Racquet Club could not add to management’s bottom line. Since this facility, with its small membership, didn’t seem to have the potential to become a profit center for the corporation, Lowe decided to get the asset off its books and donate the complex to the Flagler County School Board. The community can be thankful that the school district was willing to take on fiscal responsibility for maintaining and operating this vital asset. If the school board hadn’t assumed this responsibility, the facility would have suffered the ultimate fate of the abandoned Players Club – yesterday’s magnificent jewel, today’s rotting monument to malfeasance.

During the first six months under Lowe’s management, a flurry of administrative decisions were made that eventually resulted in dramatic changes at the Players Club. Jim Hagler, responsible for hospitality operations, initiated steps to “reposition the hotel and the other amenities to cultivate a lifestyle that would attract guests to the hotel.” Lowe needed guests, lots of them. Unlike ITT, this corporation had little to gain from attracting homebuyers, increasing land sales or improving the quality of life of their long term community members.

As mentioned earlier, they also made some critical personnel changes. In September of 1996, Jim Vidamour resigned after serving the tennis community for 15 years. A month later he was replaced by David Jenkins. Jenkins came to Palm Coast as head pro, having served in a similar capacity at a 12-court tennis club in Jacksonville. He also had worked at prestigious Amelia Island where he served as a pro and director of tennis with significant responsibility for the once famous Bausch & Lomb Tournament. A year later, on September 13, 1997, Tom Gullikson ended his 17-year relationship with the tennis community in Palm Coast. These were game-changing losses for the tennis community.

When results did not meet expectations, Lowe decided to turn over operations to world-famous Peter Burwash International (PBI) with Dave Neuhart as head tennis pro. This new
intention to make the Players Club the number one tennis facility in the country. But leadership’s actions and investment were not equal to their rhetoric, and the facility quickly began to fall on hard times. Anticipating the ultimate demise of the Players Club, concerned tennis players from across the community met on September 23, 2003, at the Community Center to explore alternatives. Encouraged by the large enthusiastic turnout, the organizers prepared and approached city leaders with a plan for a public/private tennis facility financed as a joint venture. Although that plan did not come to fruition, that committee prepared the political groundwork necessary for the acceptance of a proposal made by the Friends of Tennis two years later.

In an effort to maximize profits, fees were increased while maintenance of the facility continued to decline, causing members to leave in droves. The Players Club, once a world class tennis venue and a lustrous jewel in the city’s crown of amenities, soon became nothing more than an overgrown, rundown construction site, a parasitic host for the rising edifice being built next door by Peter Rohr and associates. Where once-manicured lawns existed and lush tropical plants and magnificent oaks accentuated the beauty of an idyllic tennis setting, piles of construction debris and trash proliferated and refuse attacked the senses. Two courts were actually torn up and excavated in order to provide sufficient fill for the
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construction needs of the European Village’s owners!

In 2005, the need for a public clay court facility reached a crescendo when the owner of the Players Club reneged on members’ contracts and gave up any pretense of staffing or maintaining even a limited number of courts for play. On August 16, 2005, a small group of tennis friends met to organize and take action to address the deplorable and deteriorating situation. The mission of this group of nine players was to reignite interest in the game and develop a plan to convince city leaders of the necessity to construct and manage a public clay-court tennis center as a community resource. This steering committee became the organizing nucleus of a community tennis association that became known as the Friends of Tennis.

The Friends of Tennis developed a strategic plan that culminated in the Palm Coast City Council’s approval of Phase 1 of a plan to construct a ten hydro-grid court facility with a temporary office. This initial phase was part of an overall three-phase site plan that included the eventual construction of a players’ facility and 20 courts plus a stadium court for community events and featured matches. Groundbreaking for Phase I took place on January 16, 2007. The Tennis Center was opened to the public on a fee-for-play basis and officially dedicated on November 10, 2007.

In keeping with tradition, Tom Gullikson, Mal Washington and other guest pros played an exhibition match to celebrate the grand opening. Today, the Palm Coast Tennis Center is a vibrant
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and highly active facility that operates under the leadership of Ken Obermeier, Tennis Superintendent for the city, and Tennis Supervisor Alena Dvornikova. There is a wide variety of programs available to members and the public including individual tennis lessons, clinics, league play, social play and special social events that feature exhibitions, round robins, and tournaments. Recently, the center hosted two successful tournaments and has been recognized by the USTA as an “Outstanding Tennis Facility.” This prestigious national award will be officially presented at the USTA’s annual fall meeting in New York City.

Because the game is a social as well as competitive sport, participants are always ready to actively support tennis players at all ages and levels of play. The history of tennis in Palm Coast documents the willingness of players to volunteer to provide community service, organize and work to improve facilities, and provide opportunities for those who are returning to the game or just beginning to learn the sport. That was true for all those volunteers who joined together to organize the Palm Coast Tennis Association in 1974 and later for members of the Friends of Tennis who assumed that organizing role in 2005.

Drawn together by the love of the game, tennis players in this community continue to strive to see Palm Coast resume its rightful place as a premier tennis destination. Forty years ago, there were no tennis courts in the greater Palm Coast area; today there are 93 courts located at 21 existing tennis facilities. This dramatic growth should make it clear that tennis played a large and important role in this community’s development. As this city grows, so will the number of residents who will want access to quality tennis facilities and programs. Like ITT’s willingness to invest in Palm Coast’s amenities, the city’s willingness to invest in Phase 1 of a first class Tennis Center will continue to pay great dividends because of the quality of citizens who have been and will continue to be drawn to live and contribute their talents and industry in service to this community.

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development, ITT’s planners recognized the important role a tennis facility plays in providing a social hub where members can join together to develop a “sense of community spirit.” That’s why ITT invested in tennis amenities in every enclave they built from 1970 through 1995. They also understood that by attracting tennis players they would be attracting citizens who would become vital partners in creating a more vibrant community.

From this brief review of the history of tennis in Palm Coast, it should be obvious that the game of tennis served as a magnet in attracting residents and tennis enthusiasts to the community. Beyond that, members of this community recognize the value of tennis as a lifelong sport; many participants on our courts today began at age three or four and many are still playing well into their 80s and 90s. It should also be clear from this history that participation in the game played an important role in the formation of community traditions that bound players together and created a sense of community spirit that was vital to Palm Coast’s development during the last four decades. This community would have been a very different place had it not been for the vision its founders had in establishing and supporting the amenities that contributed to the community spirit that makes Palm Coast so very different from neighboring cities. For these and many other reasons, the City of Palm Coast must continue to invest in quality facilities and programs and continue to build on the strong tradition of tennis in this community. If we do, we will continue to attract active, enthusiastic residents to this city. In that process, we will also attract dedicated citizens who will work to build a stronger more vital city and make it a better place to live for all those who elect to reside here.

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Since 2005, I have been compiling artifacts related to the history of tennis in Palm Coast. Unfortunately, some of the information vital to that record is incomplete or is completely missing. In my effort to piece together an accurate record of the past 40 years, I’m asking for your help. If you have information relevant to the history of tennis, please contact me, George Libonate, at Galcoiv@yahoo.com. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

This article provides a brief overview of the crucial role that tennis played and continues to play in the development of the City of Palm Coast. A more detailed series of articles entitled THE GOLDEN AGE OF TENNIS IN PALM COAST will be published in the near future.