



MIKE DAVIES

There are only a couple hundred people in the International Tennis Hall of Fame, and one is quietly living in The Landings with his wife, getting credit for everything from the color of the tennis balls we use, to the chance to take a break between games.

Mike Davies is a living legend, but not for what he did on the court—even though he was the best player in Great Britain at one point. This 79-year-old is known for what he did for tennis as a business.

We asked fellow Hall of Famer and top announcer Cliff Drysdale for a comment on his former colleague, and here is what he said, *“Mike turned ideas into reality. He played a good game on court but kept his best game for leadership and innovation. He led tennis kicking and screaming into the modern pro era. His legacy is that his changes both on court and on TV are alive and well today.”*

These days Davies is facing a much different challenge. His health. He’s battling prostate cancer and asbestos poisoning. We began on that subject during a recent chat in The Landings Clubhouse, not far from where Center Court has been named after him.



Ray Collins and Mike Davies

MD: I can take chemotherapy and that could hopefully extend my life, but there’s no cure. They said it’s Stage 4.

RC: How does that feel?

MD: Well, I took a couple months to get used to it.

RC: Asbestos poisoning?

MD: I’ve beat my brains out wondering how I got it. All I can think of is my hometown in Wales had an asbestos factory. I did spend the first 16 years of my life there. And they say it takes 60 years before it comes out.

RC: You began in Wales, were the top player in Great Britain and reached the doubles final of Wimbledon in 1960. Yet somehow you’re in the Hall of Fame for what you did after your playing career.

MD: In the end of ‘67 I had finished playing, I was 31, and realized I better find something to do. So Vic Braden and I sat down and talked about putting together a tennis academy out in California. My first wife’s father had the first tennis academy that was ever built in 1953 in the South of France.

But out of the blue came a call from Dave Dixon, the guy who created World Championship Tennis (WCT). After losing all his money in the first three months, Butch Buchholz said, “We can’t keep doing this. Call Mike Davies to help.” I went for 2 weeks and I stayed for 13 years. (WCT signed the best players of the era, they became “pro” rather than amateur and the popularity of the game grew dramatically.)

RC: You are the reason we have yellow tennis balls. How did that happen?

MD: We wanted to get tennis on television, but it wasn’t easy. We got complaints from the viewers that they couldn’t see the ball well enough. In a move to help that, I said to NBC, “You’re the professionals, what color ball would work best on a blue court?” They said, “Orange.” We first played in Jamaica with the orange ball, but the courts there were green, and it didn’t work. I said, “We can’t use a different ball for different courts, so we have to get universal some way.” And around then we hit on yellow.

RC: Don’t you feel powerful?

MD: Ha ha, powerful. (Shakes head.) The one thing I regret—a friend asked, “Do you get royalties?” I WISH!

RC: You also caused us all to be taking breaks between games.

MD: Yes, we were televising a match, and when the players changed sides and kept moving, the director said, “Mike, when are we putting in the commercials?” I went out there on the court and told the two guys that we were putting chairs on the court and they had to stay seated for two minutes! The players had no interest in waiting to play. They didn’t want to do it. They had never sat down in their lives. The rule was, “play is to be continuous.” But we put a guy on the court with a headset timing the two minutes.

RC: So far you’ve changed the face of tennis (balls) and the pace of tennis (time-outs)!

MD: Yeah. I was planning a tournament in Hawaii, but Rod Laver wouldn’t play if Illie Nastase played. Laver thought Nastase spent too much tie ranting and raving and running around. So we put a 30-second time clock on the court. The sun was too bright to see it, so we put mosquito netting over the face. The only guy who went over the limit was Ken Rosewall! He forgot!

These days, players like (Rafael) Nadal and a few others abuse the time limit. They (umpires) don’t call it. It would better serve tennis if they put clocks on the court again. And the use of the towel has gotten . . . (whistles and twirls finger in air).



Mike Davies and Rod Laver

RC: Can you trace what caused the boom of tennis in the 1970s?

MD: Absolutely. We had a match between Laver and Ken Rosewall in 1972 that has been called, “The Greatest Match of All Time.” They played 5 sets. NBC pre-empted the 6 o’clock news on Sunday. That’s where we got an audience. That was the moment it all boomed.

By the way, in the mid-70’s, we were testing cameras in Vegas when a guy came along and said, “You need to get a shot of this kid.” We saw him and he was so good we rolled some film. It’s the video you see of Andre Agassi when he was 7. You can see our WCT logos all around him.

RC: Wow! I’ve seen that video. So, you are credited with making tennis a business.

MD: The greatest thing I ever did . . . I arranged my own tournaments. We worked out deals. I did this around the world, on the phone 24 hours a day. There was no rhyme or reason to it. We’re going to have 20 tournaments. Each will have 32 players. \$50,000 per tournament. The top 8 will qualify for the Finals. Nobody had played for that much money. I looked at a map of the world, and worked out a point system that is still used today.

When we played in Tehran (Iran) the guy who worked in Europe for me said he spoke to the Shah’s people and told them “We need good linesmen and ball boys.” The General said, “Ball boys are not a problem. And I can give you 20 of my best snipers for the linesmen.” The players said, “The calls were surprisingly good.” (Laughs hard.)

RC: Any regrets over the years?

MD: Lots of things, but nothing serious. I made a lot of mistakes in my business career, but learned a lot.

RC: Do you like the instant-review technology?

MD: I had it in 1971 or ‘72 in the finals in Dallas, but we had a thunderstorm and it played havoc with this electric system, so we had to cut it.

RC: Best player of all time?

MD: Roger Federer. But the guy who was close with sheer talent was Lew Hoad back in the 1950’s, but he had a short career due to back injuries. But if Hoad, Laver, Rosewall and the rest had been given equipment, coaches, trainers, doctors, lawyers, drivers—and they didn’t have to do one thing else like make hotel reservations and call cabs and airplane reservations—because we had nobody, and you couldn’t afford to travel with your wife.

RC: Best female of all time?

MD: You have to go with Serena Williams. But Steffi Graff would have given her a tough time.

RC: Why do you think tennis isn’t more popular in the media?

MD: The ATP, WTA, and the USTA need to put a full-court press on the American press. I can’t believe we have major tournaments, and we don’t even get in the results column of *USA Today*. Golf gets inches and inches of coverage. That doesn’t happen by chance. You have to come up with story lines.

When we did the Dallas finals, we invited journalists from around the world, wine and dined them, made sure they had gifts, we bribed them! That was a major thing for us. It paid off. We had some good matches. We were a rogue company, but we won a lot of those people over. I really can’t believe we can’t get the kind of ink that golf gets. There are terrible television ratings.

RC: Why?

MD: People would rather play.

RC: Why aren’t there more Americans in the top of tennis?

MD: Just the cycle. That’s all.

RC: How did you wind up in Sarasota?

MD: I was living in New Haven. Butch (Buchholz) had asked me to look after the Pilot Penn tournament. One night (in 2000) they predicted a big snow storm, and I’m saying, “What on earth am I doing here?” So I pulled out some files, threw some clothes in the back seat, and said, “I’m driving to Florida, I’ll find a place.”

RC: Your legacy?

MD: I don’t know. I just think I improved the game. Butch (Buchholz), Barry (McKay) and I used to sit around at night after 3 hours of playing, 1 o’clock in the morning, find a cab and a place to eat, in Italy or somewhere where we didn’t know the language. And Barry used to say, “One day we’ll play for \$100,000 a tournament. And Butch said, “You’re out of your mind.” We did it—and sometimes we created a monster because now the US Open is giving \$3.3 million to the winner.



Mike Davies at Wimbledon

Ray Collins is a TV newscaster on ABC 7 and a media consultant. More details at www.RayCollinsMedia.com