

# A Tribute to a Lifelong Friend

By Ray Collins

I used to watch my father play tennis through the net. That was my vantage point as self-appointed ball boy. I'd scramble around picking up the balls—until he finally asked me to sit down, or until I saw something shiny that diverted my attention.

Each summer morning, I rode my banana-seat bike to the public courts with my metal Wilson T-2000 racquet in hand and dirty white tennis balls jammed in the spokes. The Town of Amherst, N.Y., recreation program in suburban Buffalo included daily free tennis lessons for kids of all ages and abilities.

After dinner—if I didn't have a Little League baseball game—I'd play tennis some more or hit tennis balls against the wall at the junior high. An acoustically satisfying "three-sided wall" made the sweet-spot of my \$12 nylon strings thud like a marching band bass drum. I probably hit a hundred balls up on the roof over the years—but by the time I was practicing lobs, it was usually time for bed anyway.

During the bitter cold winters, I'd take a city bus—or even hitchhike—to the indoor Buffalo Tennis Center. It was a long rectangular former warehouse turned into a tennis oasis, safe from the slush and snow outside. It always seemed counter-intuitive to put on a tennis outfit under my layers of winter clothes and head out in the cold.

But once I got out on those slick rubbery courts and felt the ball on the strings, all the effort to get to the other end of the rainbow made perfect sense. (There was usually a dark-haired kid around the same age on the next court who would draw a crowd each time he hit a ball. The racquet went up to his waist, but boy, he could pound the ball. More on him later.)

All this playing began paying off when I became No. 1 singles player and captain of my high school tennis team. The back fence on our home courts was up against an



**'Since childhood, tennis has always been there for me—even during my brief but torrid affair with golf.'**



Ray with Jimmy Arias

expressway; we didn't finish many matches with all three tennis balls. I did well in the Catholic league—but I didn't have a prayer against the non-conference schools. I vividly recall my undefeated record disappearing in less than 30 minutes to the top player from a private school that joined our division for a year. Our warm-up lasted longer than the match itself. A local TV station came to shoot the highlights of our match, but there were none.

I got a partial athletic scholarship to play tennis for St. Bonaventure University—but "partial" may be overstating it: \$350 a year. I don't even think I ever received it—and was too embarrassed to ask. The highlight of each season was traveling to the annual NCAA Atlantic 10 Championships and staying in hotels. Our small school never did well against mega-campuses like Penn State, UMass or Rutgers. Calling it a David and Goliath situation would be an insult to David. We felt more like the Washington Federals up against the Harlem Globetrotters.

## Taking It On The Road

I went away my junior year of college to intern for a TV news network in its Capitol Hill bureau. One day in the Senate Press Gallery, I overheard legendary network correspondent Brit Hume lamenting the fact that his regular tennis opponent for the next morning had canceled and he needed to find a game. I heard myself say, "I'll play."

"You any good?" Hume asked.

I must have convinced him—because the next morning, he was picking me up outside my dormitory to take me to his private club. I won, something like 6-3, 6-1. I might have done even better if I didn't keep hearing in my mind each time he was about to serve, "Brit Hume, ABC News, the White House." I remember him talking in the car on the way back to campus about recently getting the assign-

ment to cover the Walter Mondale Presidential campaign. I felt like a big shot that day.

I wanted to do something different my last summer before college graduation—and naturally wound up falling back on my old familiar friend—tennis. I saw a classified ad in the *Washington Post* for seasonal tennis instructors. I auditioned with dozens of other players one Saturday morning for a company that placed tennis teachers around the country at private clubs, resorts and hotels. I was lucky enough to be chosen—and given the option of spending the summer teaching tennis in Minnesota, Delaware or New Jersey. They then added, “New Jersey has free housing in a ‘clubhouse’ on the grounds of a country club.” Sold.

I became the summer tennis pro at a rural country club in northwest New Jersey. The grounds were beautiful—but it turns out the “clubhouse” was not. It was the former clubhouse that had deteriorated into a haunted mansion. Water and plumbing had long-since been turned off. The assistant golf pro and I each had a small room at the top of the

ships. I stood in the photographers’ “pit” courtside during matches—and afterward interviewed all the big names of pro tennis at the time, from Pete Sampras, to Andre Agassi, to Steffi Graf and Lindsay Davenport.

Later, I was sent to Miami to cover the best junior players in the country in the Easter Bowl. I initiated a story about 12-year-old twin brothers who were polite, respectful and well-mannered. I never imagined little Bob and Mike Bryan would later become the best doubles team in the history of the sport.

I had a chance to interview legendary commentator Andy Rooney who was in town for a lecture. He was just as much of a curmudgeon as you’d expect—that is, until I asked him about his tennis game. His demeanor changed instantly and the interview sailed from there. Afterward, I told him I’d be in New York City soon and asked if he wanted to play—which he said he would. But when I called to confirm weeks later, Rooney said “I don’t want to play, I don’t know how good you are.” I assured him I had played before. He said, “That’s the thing—Harry Rea-



Ray reporting for FOX news

‘I wanted to do something different my last summer before college graduation—and naturally wound up falling back on my old familiar friend—tennis.’



Ray and his Dad

creaking stairs. Walking through the darkened cob-webbed one-time restaurant each night to get to my room was like a scene from “The Shining.” Making matters worse, the members didn’t want tennis lessons but did want a lot of ice and towels by the courts. I wound up getting a part-time job after-hours that summer at a local radio station.

After graduation, I returned to that station near the club to begin my career as a radio DJ. I made a few extra dollars by teaching tennis in my spare time—including to the local Congressman’s young kids. The chance to make \$40 an hour for telling people to turn sideways and swing was hard to resist.

A few years later, when I wanted to get into TV news—without any on-camera experience—I once again resorted to my “old friend” tennis. I had a colleague videotape me giving a peppy “Sixty Second Tennis Tip.” It led to my first anchor job in Southwest Florida.

## Going Pro

I saw a tennis show on one of the national sports networks. I waited until the closing credits to copy down the contact information—and called the show’s producers in New York City. They offered to pay several hundred dollars per story if I could produce a human interest story they liked enough to “buy” from me. I convinced local resident—and two-time Australian Open champ—Johan Kriek to allow me to do a profile of him. We put a cordless microphone on Johan—and I casually interviewed him while we rallied back and forth on a court near his house in Naples. The producers loved it—and began assigning me to bigger tennis stories around Florida.

They sent me to Key Biscayne to cover the then-Lipton Champion-

soner brought around a guy a few years ago, I didn’t get a game off him. It was no fun for either of us. How are things in Florida?”

## Lifelong Gift

Hop-scotching the country for my career over the past quarter-century, having to assimilate into new communities has been that much easier thanks to tennis. In each new town I’d unpack my racquet, find the nearest club and make some new friends who shared a love of tennis.

Since childhood, tennis has always been there for me—even during my brief but torrid affair with golf. Tennis waited for me patiently and still took me back, no questions asked. Competitive or social, for exercise or relaxation—tennis has it all.

(By the way, that little kid at the indoor tennis center in Buffalo who always drew a crowd went on to become No. 5 in the world. Coincidentally, Jimmy Arias is a friend and ironically is a fellow-member of my tennis club in Sarasota.)

I was back in my hometown last week and made a point to go over to the junior high to hit against the wall. This time I was getting out of a car—not putting down a kick-stand. The balls were new and no longer had my initials scrawled on them with magic marker. My reflection in the adjacent classroom window revealed the passing of the years, but the sound of the ball on the strings hadn’t changed a bit.

My father has since passed away, but I’ll always appreciate the lifelong gift he gave me of tennis. 🎾

*Ray Collins is a Sarasota, Florida-based freelance writer. More information at [www.RayCollinsMedia.com](http://www.RayCollinsMedia.com)*