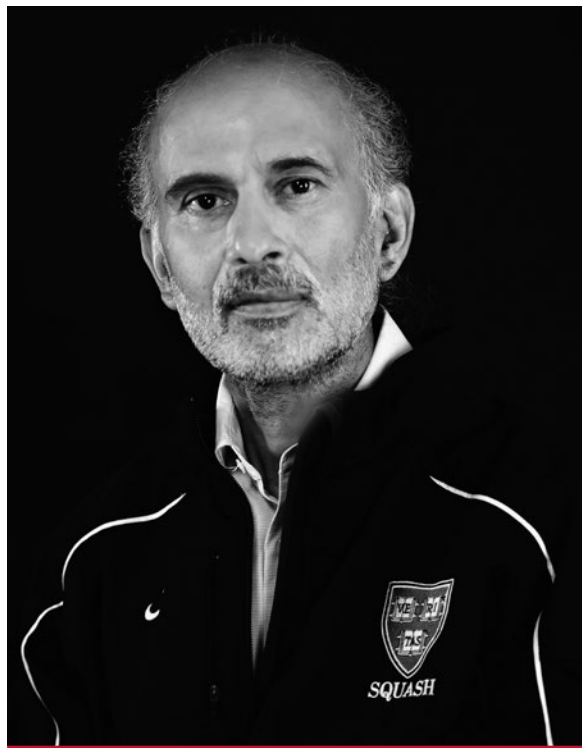

A History of Harvard Squash during the

SATINDER BAJWA

COACHING ERA 1999-2010



INTRODUCTION

The first Ivy League squash coach not from North America, Satinder Pal Singh Bajwa, universally known as Baj, led the Crimson men's and women's teams throughout the 11-year period from 1999-2010, which as of this Spring 2015 writing was longer than any other coach had simultaneously held the head position of both teams in a major college program until Dave Talbott equaled that span at Yale just this past winter. During Bajwa's years at the Crimson helm, Harvard's men's teams won the USSRA Five-Man Team event in 2000 and Ivy League titles in 2001 and from 2004-06, while the women's team captured the Howe Cup emblematic of the postseason national championship in 2001 and 2010 and earned the Ivy League crown each of those years as well as in 2002, 2003 and 2006.

He took over the Harvard squash program in September 1999, succeeding Bill Doyle, during whose staggeringly successful seven-year stint from 1992-99 Harvard earned five Potter Cups (the men's counterpart to the Howe Cup) and five Howe Cups, with both teams going undefeated wire-to-wire throughout the four-year period from 1994-97. Bajwa arrived at a time when Trinity College was well along in its historic 13-year domination (from 1999-2011) of the Potter Cup, and in the wake of the graduation of six members from the starting lineup of the women's senior-dominated 1999 Ivy League championship squad.

Yet despite this decidedly less than sanguine backdrop, Baj, accompanied throughout his final 10 years by his invaluable assistant coach Mohammad "Mo" Ayaz, led the Harvard men to four Potter Cup finals (in 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2005) and the women to Howe Cup final-round appearances in 2002, 2005, 2007 and 2009 in addition to that pair of Howe Cup wins in 2001 and 2010. At a time throughout which no men's team beat Trinity between the 1998 Potter Cup final, which Doyle's gang won 5-4, and (252 matches and almost 14 years later) a January 2012 dual-meet loss to Yale, Harvard was the Bantams' most persistent challenger, with 5-4 near-misses in the 2001 and 2007 dual meets as well as in an agonizing and somewhat controversial 2004 Potter Cup final.

Nine of the 11 Potter Cup losses that Harvard suffered during Bajwa's years as coach were at Trinity's hands, and it wasn't until his final season in 2010 that the Crimson men were stopped short of the semifinals of that season-defining team tournament. Only during the 2007-08 season, when the women's team was decimated by injury and graduation, the men's team had lost five of its starting nine from the prior year, and BOTH teams had lost the 2007 Intercollegiate Individuals champion (Siddharth Suchde and Kyla Grigg), did the Crimson fail to place at least one of its teams in the finals of either the Potter Cup or the Howe Cup. Suchde and Grigg, both of whom, to their credit, rebounded after losing their respective 2006 Individuals finals, were joined as Baj-coached Individuals winners by Lily Lorentzen in 2006 and Colin West and Laura Gemmell in 2010.

Bajwa's career arc as both player and coach prior to his arrival in Cambridge in 1999 was markedly different from that of any of his predecessors, all of whom had either been steeped in Harvard racquet sports (Jack Barnaby '32 and Dave Fish '72 had been star tennis and squash players as collegians), served as Harvard assistant coaches for several years before ascending to the head position (Steve Piltch) or been first-team all-Americans at other colleges (Doyle). By contrast, Baj did not even take up the sport until the late-1970's, by which time he was well into his 20's, having concentrated on tennis and soccer prior to then in England, where he spent his formative and teen years. A few years after earning a degree in Engineering at the Southall College of Technology in London in 1980, he traveled to Philadelphia, where Boeing had one of its major offices, seeking a position with this engineering giant.

While there, he stopped off at the Berwyn Squash & Fitness Club, was introduced to the hardball game for the first time and shortly thereafter was hired as the pro, where he remained for 18 months before briefly moving to the Commodore Club in St. Paul's, MN, and then to the United States Military Academy at West Point, whose squash team he coached from 1985-88. His one connection to Harvard squash during that time frame had been that, when he attended the World Pro Squash Association (WPSA) Championships weekend in Toronto in January 1983 and took the test to become officially certified as a Teaching Pro, his test administrator was Jack Barnaby, who as it happens received the WPSA Man Of The Year Award that weekend, and who tasked Baj as part of the exam with demonstrating his way of teaching the volley to a beginner. Baj asserted that "every shot you hit is a volley," even if one is hitting a ball that has already bounced on the floor, his reasoning being that every ball is hit while it is in the air. Barnaby, impressed by this novel and insightful interpretation, handed out a top-level classification.

Returning to the UK during the late-1980's to take on the challenge of international (softball) squash, Baj served for several years as player-coach at the Stripes Club in west London, which fielded a team in the highly competitive British league, during which he coached a young Pakistani player named Mir Zaman Gul, who played No. 1 for Stripes (the league allowed each team to have one non-British player in the lineup) and rose from World No. 96 all the way to No. 6 in 18 months' time. One of Gul's contemporaries was Jansher Khan, who during that late-1980's time frame was becoming the leading threat to the long reign of the great Jahangir Khan. Highly impressed by the role Baj had played both in Gul's rise and in the management of the Stripes Club squad, and knowing that he needed someone to manage his own career, Jansher asked Baj to step into that position in 1991 (shortly before Jahangir won the British Open for the 10th-straight and last time with a 3-1 final-round victory over Jansher), thereby launching a highly productive seven-year business relationship that saw Jansher win six British Opens and the final six of his eight World Opens (the first few of those having come in the years before he and Bajwa joined forces), causing him to be listed in the Guinness book of records as holding more world championship squash titles than anyone in the sport.

During that heady time frame of managing and coaching the best player in the world, Baj became the Director of Squash at Advantage International, one of the largest sports marketing companies in the world, in which capacity he revived the Super Series Squash Finals event (which had not been held for several years due to lack of sponsorship) in 1996, featuring the world's best players, which he served as Tournament Chairman throughout its subsequent 11-year run through 2006. He was also doing some pretty successful squash-playing in his own right, despite weathering a bout with Bell's palsy that temporarily paralyzed the left side of his face, leaving effects that remain slightly noticeable even today. He won the 1994 U. S. National softball 35-and-over title in San Francisco, defeating former No. 1 Bermudian Rob Thompson in the final, and reached a half-dozen other U. S. Nationals age-group finals during the 1990's as well. (During his tenure as Harvard's coach, he also notched the U. S. 45-and-over in 2002 and the Canadian 50-and-over in 2008.)

When Jansher's knees permanently gave out on him in 1998, abruptly terminating his scintillating career, Baj secured the head coaching job at Bowdoin College in Maine, where he led the men's team to its first top-10 ranking among American colleges in school history. While competing in the U.S. Nationals event at the end of that season, during which he lost the 40-and-over final to Eben Hardie, Bajwa learned that the Harvard coaching position had become open in the wake of Doyle's announcement that he would be moving on. With the blessing of the Bowdoin athletic administration, he applied for this highly prestigious appointment with its glittering 77-year tradition (Harry Cowles 1922-37, Barnaby 1937-76, Fish 1976-89, Piltch 1989-92, Doyle 1992-99) and, after several sessions with Athletic Director Bill Cleary '56 and the Committee, he was selected.

GETTING STARTED

The 1999-2000 season necessarily was one of adjustment and transition, not only in terms of roster composition --- especially for the women in the wake of the departure of the vaunted two-time Howe Cup and three-time Ivy League champion women's class of 1999, possibly representing Doyle's best-ever women's recruiting class and including Stephanie Teaford, Lindsay Wilber, Leah Ramella, Brooke Herlihy, Lana Eisenstein and Vanessa Hoermann, which left Bajwa with a very young squad, more than half of whose starting lineup was composed of sophomores and freshmen --- but also since the entire coaching staff from the year before (namely Doyle and his assistant coaches Ayaz and Kris Schutz Brownell) had left for other positions as well. Bajwa brought Tariq Mohammed, his No.1 at Bowdoin the previous year, along with him to Cambridge as one of his assistants, and hired Paul Brogna, an assistant coach at the University of Rochester, as the other.

He also brought with him a markedly different personality and coaching style from that of his predecessor, who was known for his direct, strong leadership (he had been elected Chairman of the World Pro Squash Association Tour Committee while still in his mid-20's) and his meticulous management of the program, and who throughout his years at Harvard had exuded a confidence, sharp focus and willpower perhaps best conveyed in his exhortation to his charges to be "calm on the outside, and cocky as hell on the inside," which became an enduring (and endearing) mantra among the players he coached during and even after his tenure. Baj, on the other hand, according to several of the players who played for both coaches, had a softer coaching style, less formulaic, tending more towards the art or "zen" of squash, receptive to experimentation and innovation, open to adjusting his guidance to fit individual needs, and in that sense conveying a more accommodating and less directive approach.

The highlight of his inaugural season occurred at Yale in early December when the Harvard men's team captured the USSRA Five-Man title with a convincing 4-1 final-round win over Princeton. Senior co-captain Tim Wyant, who as a sophomore had won the last and deciding match in Harvard's 5-4 '98 Potter Cup final-round victory over Trinity, had an exhausting but exhilarating breakthrough triumph at No. 1 over Peter Yik, who had defeated Wyant in the Intercollegiate Individuals final nine months earlier, in a marathon battle of attrition in which the first three games (two of which Wyant won) consumed 90 minutes. The fourth was a formality, as Yik succumbed to leg cramps and could offer no resistance. His younger brother David did manage to out-play Crimson No. 2 Shondip Ghosh, but Harvard swept the remainder, with top freshman recruit Dylan Patterson beating Will Evans (later the Individuals finalist in 2002 and 2003), sophomore Pete Karlen winning over Eric Pearson and junior Andrew Merrill out-playing Peter Kelly.

However, when these two Ivy League rivals met at the Murr Courts on February 13th, the Tigers were able to narrowly prevail 5-4 in the dual meet that essentially determined the Ivy League title for that year, in the process ending a 58-match Harvard men's Ivy League dual-meet winning streak dating back to a loss to Yale in February 1990. "Too many injuries and too many Yiks" was the summarizing assessment in the write-up in *The Crimson*, as Peter Yik (who would go on to successfully defend his Individuals crown) barely got past Wyant, 17-14 in the fourth; David Yik scored a 3-1 win at No. 2 against Deepak Abraham, who badly sprained his right ankle midway through and was not the same player from that point on; and Patterson, plagued by a back injury incurred while running outdoors on a cold late-December day that lingered for most of that season and had forced Bajwa to sit him out of the Penn match the day before, was unable to convert a two games to one advantage and lost, 15-7 in the fifth, to Pearson.

Harvard avenged this setback two weeks later with a 6-3 tally in the Potter Cup tournament, by which time Patterson (who contributed a thrilling 3-2 win at No. 6 over Dan Rutherford) and Abraham had mostly recovered, and both junior Grayson Witcher and senior co-captain Eric Lauer (who had been inserted into the No. 9 slot when Merrill, who had been undefeated all season, spent the entire weekend bedridden with pneumonia) won in five games as well. But the next day the Crimson players were overrun by Trinity 8-1, with Patterson's win at No. 6 over Gaurav Juneja accounting for the only Crimson point of the day.

Four of the women's team's five losses that winter were by 5-4 scores, in dual meets at Trinity and against Princeton and in the Howe Cup semifinal against eventual-champion Penn (which captured this title for the first and only time in school history that year) and the third-place match vs. Trinity. Although Princeton had a very powerful top of the lineup, with juniors Julia Beaver (who at the conclusion of that season would win the second of her three-straight Individuals titles) and Meredith Quick (later a three-time U. S. Nationals finalist) leading the way, perhaps

the key Tiger win in the dual meet was supplied when Liz Kelly, Peter's older sister, surmounted a two games to love deficit to win in five over the flu-ridden freshman Ella Witcher, Grayson's younger sister, whose energy level visibly and understandably decreased as the last three games unfolded.

For Kelly and her teammates, it was a vindictory mirror image of what had happened three years earlier, when SHE as a freshman had let a combined five match-games get away in dual-meet and Howe Cup final-round losses to Crimson senior Lucy Cummings, whose successful rallies from 0-2 in the dual meet and 1-2 in the Howe Cup match enabled Harvard to win 5-4 in both cases. For Harvard, on the other hand, the 5-4 setbacks that the men's and women's teams had both sustained that gloomy February 2000 afternoon deprived them of a chance to retain the Ivy League titles that each had won in 1999. As noted, the men's team rebounded by reaching the final of the Potter Cup and the women came extremely close to emulating them before falling just short in their semifinal with Penn.

In that latter clash, Harvard's depth was impressive, with captain Blair Endresen and her teammates Lindsay Coleman, Frances Holland and Katie Gregory sweeping the Nos. 6-9 positions. Bajwa tried to strengthen the middle of his lineup that day by moving junior Virginia Brown, who had gone 9-1 during the season at No. 6, up to No. 5, but Penn nevertheless swept the Nos. 2-5 slots, leaving the outcome to the No. 1 match between Harvard sophomore Margaret Elias and Penn senior captain Katie Patrick. The Penn star had won their dual-meet match in straight sets one week earlier and she took the opening game of this rematch as well. But Elias eked out the second game 9-7 and then rode a hot shooting streak to 9-3 in the third, leaving Harvard just one game away from a berth in the final against Princeton. However, Patrick rose to the demands of the moment, taking the fourth game 9-6 and the fifth 9-4, following which the Quakers edged Princeton 5-4 in the final.

The disappointment of this near-miss aside, it was still a memorable and promising season for the Harvard women --- and one that laid the foundation for the glory that awaited them just one year later, when prize freshman recruit Louisa Hall, winner of a record eight U. S. Junior championships during her high-school years at Episcopal Academy in suburban Philadelphia, arrived on campus (along with two other valuable freshmen in Kristin Wadhwa and Ashley Harmeling) and immediately moved to the No. 1 position, where she remained throughout her first-team all-American four years. Backing Hall in the Nos. 2-4 spots were a trio of juniors --- co-captain Elias, the team No. 1 player in her prior two years, Carlin Wing and Hall's older sister, Colby --- whose experience enduring an agonizing 5-4 Howe Cup final loss to Princeton in '99 and those four airtight setbacks in 2000 had steeled their determination to go all the way in 2001. They were followed by co-captain Brown at No. 5, Witcher at 6, Gregory at 7 and the two freshmen Harmeling and Wadha at 8 and 9.

Only a narrow 5-4 loss to Trinity marred what would have been an undefeated regular season, as the team regained the Ivy League title, mostly on the strength of consecutive-day road wins over first Penn 5-4 --- with Harvard sweeping the Nos. 7-9 slots and getting a needed win at No. 2 from Elias over Defna Wegner, a former Israeli soldier who showed her toughness by spitting out a bloodied tooth after an Elias follow-through had dislodged it and immediately re-entering the court to resume the match --- and then Princeton 6-3. The Harvard players all badly wanted another shot at Trinity, and when they earned one, this time in the Howe Cup final and for the national championship, by defeating Penn 6-3 in the semis while the Bantams were out-playing Princeton, the decisive blow of the ensuing clash between the two top women's college teams in the country may have been delivered even before the first ball was struck.

WOMEN IN BLACK

A festive hum of anticipation and excitement permeated Yale's impressive Brady Squash Center that Sunday afternoon, and the Trinity players, buoyed by their undefeated season and appearance in the first Howe Cup final in the history of the school, were drinking it in, accepting congratulations from their fans and other spectators and enjoying the entire atmosphere. The Harvard players and coaches, on the other hand, were nowhere to be seen, self-sequestered in a small locker room in the bowels of the massive Payne Whitney Gymnasium until just before player introductions were scheduled to begin, at which point the entire contingent emerged clad completely in black (the players had selected that color uniform rather than their crimson or white uniforms, and the coaches all wore dark suits as well) as they strode, unsmiling and purposeful, into the main exhibition court, their cumulative body language conveying the powerful and unmistakable message that they were there for the sole purpose of taking care of business and returning the Howe Cup trophy to Cambridge where it belonged --- and that they would not under any circumstances be denied.

This dramatic appearance had a definite and substantial intimidating impact on their Trinity opponents (several of whom acknowledged this afterwards), all the more so when Wing then backed it up in a vital early win from two-love down against Pam Saunders, whom Wing obliterated 9-2 in the fourth and fifth games. Witcher also rebounded from an early deficit to score a 3-1 win over Mollie Anderson (daughter of the former WPSA top-five and '79 North American Open finalist Gordy Anderson), while Elias, Wadhwa and Harmeling won in straight sets. With the team outcome thus ensured, Brown closed out the day by rallying from 0-2 to defeat Clare Austin, reversing the result of their dual-meet match two weeks earlier.

Afterwards, she noted, "We knew that we could beat Trinity and saw this second match not so much as revenge but as a time to prove ourselves. When it came down to the final push, we had the guts to pull through." Elias's assessment was more direct: "Emotions were running high and we won with authority. People played with their hearts and minds, and it was a great way to end the season." It was the 11th Howe Cup title for Harvard, and the first in four years. The roster was very thin that whole season, with only 11 players in the program, two of them walk-ons, so it was extremely fortunate that the players were able to stay injury- and illness-free throughout the entire year, which ended with Louisa Hall winning Ivy League Rookie Of The Year honors and heading a quartet of Crimson first-team all-Americans that included her sister Colby as well as Wing and Elias.



Harvard Women's Squash 2000-2001

The men's 2000-01 season was similarly heavily affected by an off-the-court event, in their instance not in the run-up to an uplifting triumph but rather in the aftermath of a demoralizing drubbing. At that season's USSRA Five-Man tournament in Hartford, Trinity had thrashed Harvard in embarrassing fashion, winning all 15 combined games by such big margins that Bajwa, fearing that there might well be a carry-over effect when the dual meets began in earnest a few weeks later and therefore wanting to deal with the loss right where it happened, called a team meeting in the downtown hotel where they were staying in which he expressed his wish to "right the ship" and threw open the floor for suggestions. By all accounts the exchange that followed was cathartic and positive, leading to a strengthened team resolve and an aftermath in which Baj and Mo introduced a new wrinkle that they had been thinking about and planning for several months.

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