

A History of Harvard Squash during the

# **HARRY COWLES**

## **COACHING ERA 1922-1937**



# INTRODUCTION

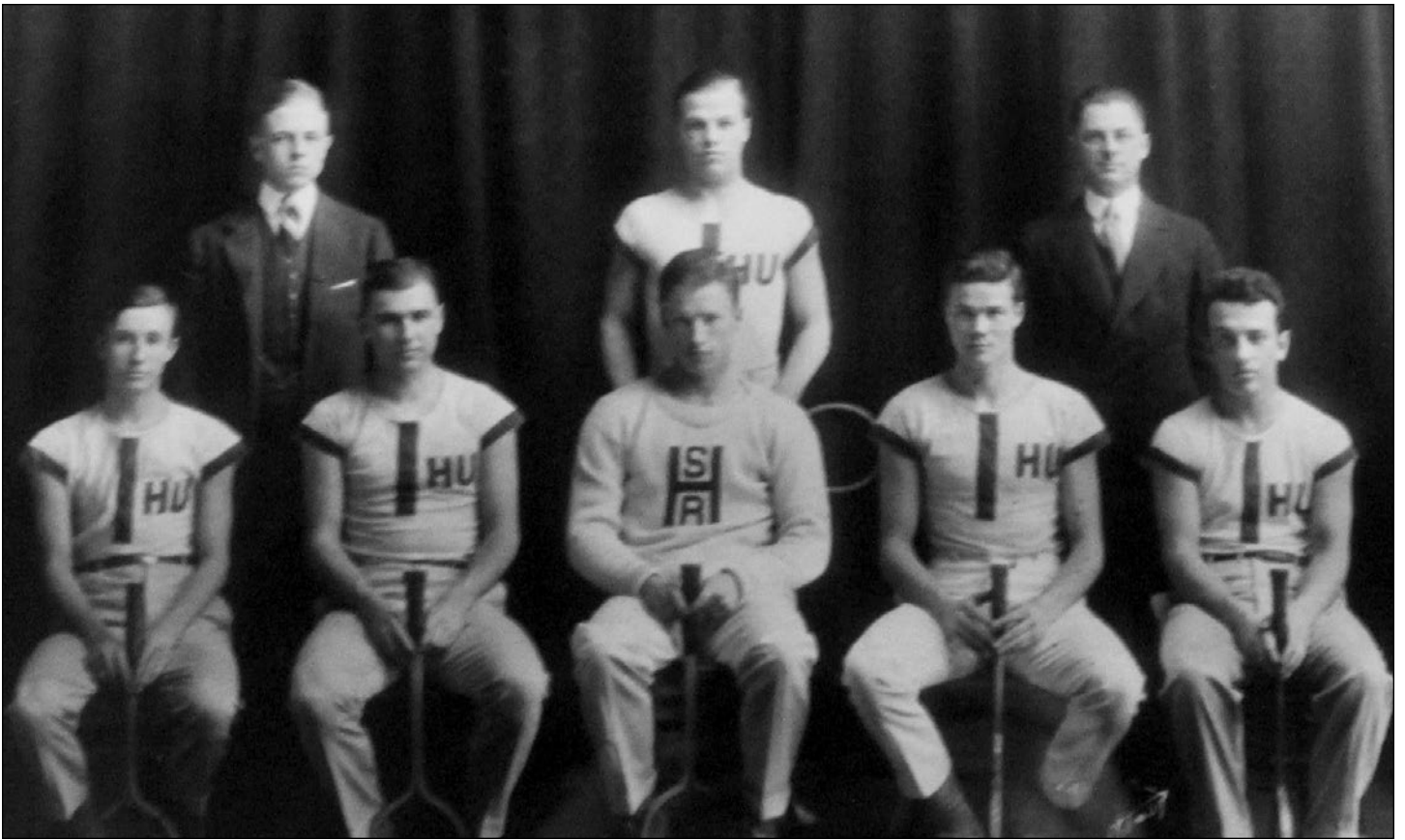
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Shortly after the end of World War I, two separate but related developments occurred that would influence the history of Harvard squash for the next 95 years and counting. The first was a letter that Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell wrote to Athletics Director Henry Geer directing him to improve Harvard's athletics program, and the second was a poll taken among the students who frequented an old building on Linden Street to determine the comparative popularity of the mélange of walled games contained therein, which included squash, squash tennis and even a court-tennis court. Squash finished atop the poll by a wide margin, in response to which the University remodeled the building to consist exclusively of 20 squash courts, a process that took place over a four-year span from 1920-24 and resulted in the building being named "The University Squash Courts."

By that time as well, and just prior to the outset of the 1922-23 season, when Harvard entered two teams in the Boston squash leagues, the need for a coach had been filled in the person of Harry Lee Cowles, a small but exceedingly quick and racquet-sports-talented product of English parents who had grown up in Newport, Rhode Island, where as a youngster he was taught all the racquet sports --- namely court tennis, squash racquets, squash tennis, lawn tennis and rackets --- at the famed Newport Casino (home of the International Tennis Hall of Fame and Museum) by its legendary English-born head pro Tom Pettitt. The latter, who had held the world championship throughout the period from 1885-90 in court tennis, his favorite sport, imbued in his young protégé an appreciation for the degree of cross-fertilization that exists among all the racquet games, especially those in which walls are involved. As one example, the heavy slice routinely utilized in stroking a court tennis ball (in order to cause the ball to drop straight down when it hits the back wall, making it difficult to return) is very helpful as well in making a squash ball die. It is also useful in deception, allowing the player to swing in one direction yet allow the ball to slide off in a quite different direction.

Under Pettitt, Cowles learned everything there was to know about what a racquet can do to a ball and built a formidable game around his shot artistry (his melting drop shots, even when hit from deep in the court, nestled into the nick with maddening consistency) and mastery of deception, a quality which was enhanced by the manner in which his loosely strung racquet enabled him to, as he put it, "mother the ball." He would appear to start the ball one way (whereupon his opponent would race in that direction) but he would still have it on his racquet and therefore would deftly turn it in the other direction, causing his flat-footed opponent to have to desperately attempt to change course. Jack Barnaby '32, one of Cowles's foremost exponents and later first his assistant coach (from 1932-37) and then his legendary successor as head coach of the squash and tennis teams until his retirement in June 1976, wrote of Cowles's propensity to send his opponents off on wild goose chases, concluding that "Never has the power of suggestion been so potently employed, and of course Cowles preserved an owl-like solemnity while persuading his opponents to rush idiotically around the court."

When the Harvard Club of Boston opened its squash courts on Commonwealth Avenue in 1914, Cowles left Newport and headed to Back Bay, where he spent the next eight years before moving the short distance to Harvard in 1922. Intercollegiate squash was in its absolute infancy at the time --- Yale was Harvard's only college opponent from the 1925 inaugural match through the 1927-28 season, with Harvard winning all four times --- so throughout the 1920's and early 1930's the main focus was on the Massachusetts States team and individual competitions and the United States Squash Racquets Association (USSRA) Individual and Five-Man Team Championships. The Massachusetts league included team entries from the Harvard Club, the Tennis & Racquet Club, the Union Boat Club and the Boston Athletic Association, all of which won the league title multiple times, though none did so as often as Harvard. During Cowles 15-year tenure, the Crimson won the Mass States team title for four straight years from 1924-27 as well as in 1931 and 1935 (six times overall), and the USSRA Five-Man crown a total of five times --- from 1925-27 plus in 1931 and 1932. No other college team won this latter championship even once until 1959 (by which time Harvard had added a sixth national team title to its ledger in 1951), when Yale accomplished the feat, only to then lose to Harvard in the dual-meet two weeks later.

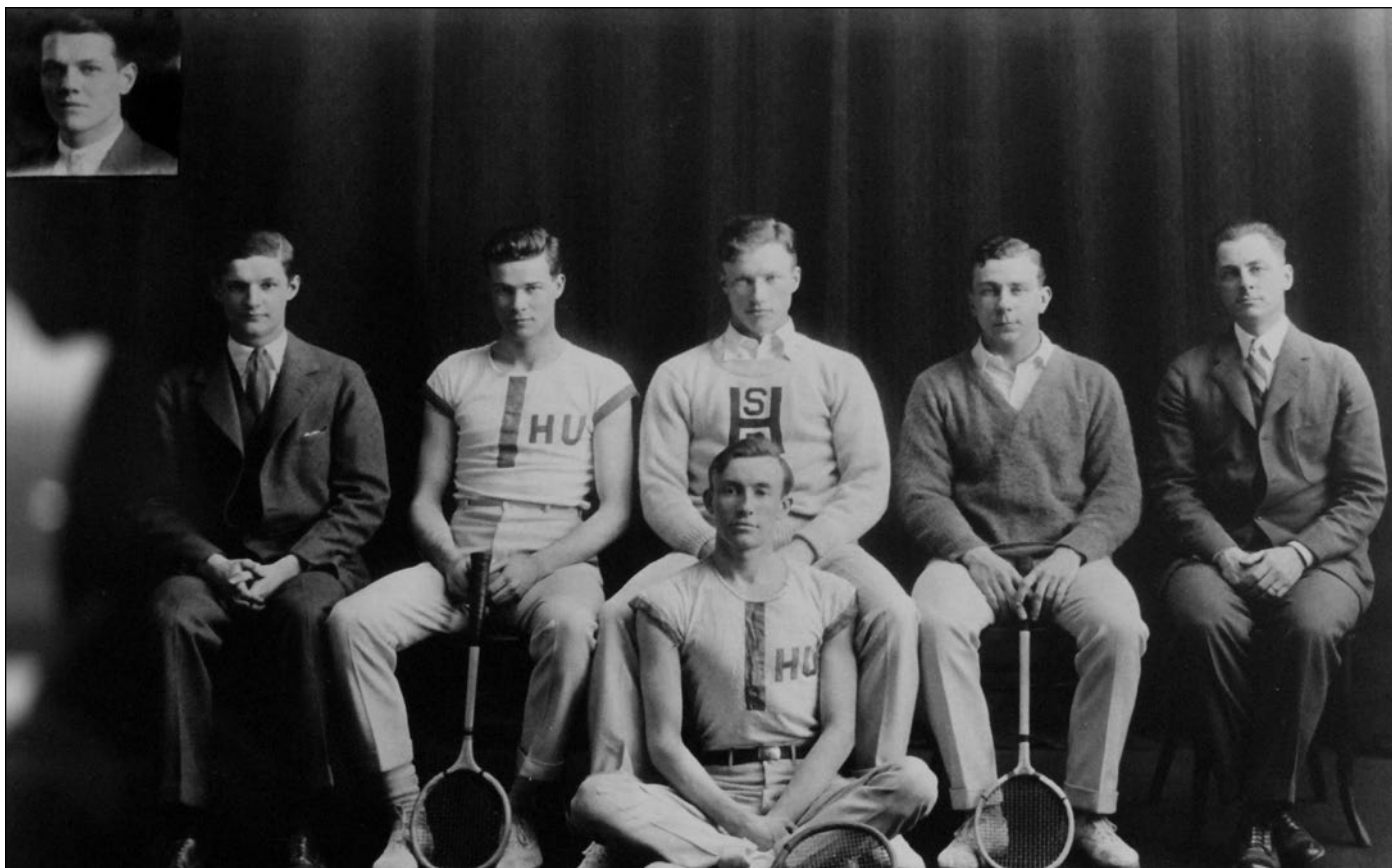


*Harvard Men's Squash 1923-1924*

## THE STERLING SEVEN

Cowles is perhaps known best for both the number of U. S. Nationals champions he produced --- his total of seven (Myles Baker '22, W. Palmer Dixon '25, Herb Rawlins '27, Larry Pool '28, his younger brother Beekman Pool '32, Willing Patterson '32 and Germain G. Glidden '36) far exceeds that of any other coach --- and for the variety of their styles. This latter phenomenon is a testament to Cowles's ability to make a total assessment of a given player and intuit how that particular player, with his particular temperament, physique, racquet skills, mental assets, potentialities and limitations, could maximize his game. Cowles was able to think originally and to analyze the most subtle situation with the patience, persistence, clarity, understanding and imagination that characterizes all great teachers. It is a telling expression of Cowles's philosophy in this regard that when he wrote his book "The Art Of Squash Racquets," published in 1935, the summarizing chapter is entitled "The Best Game: Every Man To His Talent."

There was no "Cowles system" or secret formula; his players played not HIS game but their OWN games, which Cowles's vision and coaching enabled them to construct so well that they defeated all opponents. Defeat them this septet certainly did: during the 16 years from 1925-1940 inclusive that the U. S. Nationals was held, Cowles-coached Harvard players, either while current students or after graduating, emerged victorious 13 times, including throughout the nine-year period from 1925-33. Similarly in the Mass States tourney, during the 18-year period from 1924-41, 15 times the event was won by a Harvard player past or present, with Baker (one Nationals, four Mass States), Dixon (two Nationals, one Mass States) and the Pool brothers (both of whom won two of each) all winning each of these tournaments at least once.



*Harvard Men's Squash 1924-1925*

Dixon was Cowles's first truly great player and later became one of Harvard squash's biggest benefactors. Dixon had attended secondary school in England (at Eton) and hence had to make the conversion to hardball upon arriving at Harvard. He had neither the booming pace nor the pinpoint shot-making accuracy that would characterize Cowles's later champions, but rather was a master "position" player, expert at taking control of the tee, intercepting attempts to pass him, making no errors, keeping his opponent out of position and playing the sound percentage shot, ultimately exerting

enough cumulative pressure to subdue his opponent. During both his junior and senior years, he led the Crimson to the Five-Man team title, and as a senior (i.e. the 1924-25 season), he also won the first of his two consecutive U. S. Nationals. Back then (and until 1988) both the Five-Man and the National Individual events were played on the same weekend, which meant that Dixon had had to play (and win) four matches on Saturday and another four (in the semis and finals of the two respective tournaments) on Sunday! His final-round win in the Individual event, coming just an hour or two after the team's 5-0 Teams final with Boston, was a downhill four-gamer (15-6 in the fourth) over 1920 U. S. Nationals titlist Charles Peabody of Boston.

Dixon's style of play, as referenced, was not conducive to short matches --- he couldn't blow a ball by his opponent or score on early-point nicks but rather had to "work his way" through his points --- which makes his winning of eight matches in 30 hours all the more remarkable. In addition to the stamina he had to have possessed, Dixon was such a cerebral student of the game that he actually published a book, "Strokes And Tactics Of Squash Racquets," prior to his graduation, one of whose chapters, understandably in light of his foremost trait, was named "Court Position."

He and his Crimson teammates out-played, sequentially, Washington, Philadelphia and Boston, marking the first time that this team event, which began in 1908, had been won by a college varsity, or, for that matter, by any entry other than Philadelphia or Boston. Backing up Dixon were three players, namely George Debevoise, Rawlins and Tom Jansen, who would lead Harvard to a successful defense of the Five-Man title one year later in Washington, where Dixon, now playing out of the Harvard Club of New York, would repeat as U. S. National champion with a four-game final-round victory over Foster Kellogg. Shortly after their exploits in the nation's capital, the Crimson players destroyed Yale for the second and most lopsided of 12 times in a row in dual-meet play, in this case without coming close to losing a game in their 5-0 sweep. The following year, i.e. in 1927, Harvard again took the Five-Man event, surviving 3-2 scares against both Philadelphia and Boston before blanking Buffalo 5-0 in the final, but Dixon's bid for a U. S. Nationals three-peat was foiled in the final by a power-hitting Harvard alum, Myles Baker '22, the son of a Harvard professor and a Radcliffe dean, who was a student at Harvard Medical School during the mid- and late-1920's, and whose severity along the walls was able to chase Dixon off his favorite position and into the back corners in their close (17-14 10-15 16-13 15-12) match, just as had happened when this pair had met in the Mass States final two years earlier.



*Harvard Men's Squash 1925-1926*

## BENEFACTOR

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The deep sense of loyalty that Dixon felt to Cowles (to whom he gave a portrait of himself in his captain's H sweater with the inscription, "To Harry Cowles, who taught a bad squash player how to win the championship!") and, by extension, to Harvard racquet sports, would be expressed in numerous tangible ways in later years. After Cowles' career was abruptly and cruelly truncated when he was struck down by mental illness early in 1937, Dixon both paid for Cowles's subsequent operation and hospitalization and also helped organize a large number of fellow Cowles protégés in creating a fund that was maintained as needed until his death at age 69 in 1958 (the Harvard Athletic Association also did its full share in this regard). Then, in 1951, when it appeared that insufficient funds would prevent the Crimson from sending a team to Chicago for the USSRA Five-Man event, Dixon and a few of his buddies, as recounted in an article in the school newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, chipped in with the needed \$1,000 to fund the trip.

Henry Foster, the senior captain of that '51 team, was so grateful for this gesture that he lifted his teammates to an emotional peak with the attitude he voiced during the long train ride to Illinois that "if the graduates will do that for us, watch what we'll do for them." Foster proceeded to go undefeated at No. 1, beating New York's Donnie Strachan (who, as U. S. Nationals champ in '35 and '39, had accounted for two of the three exceptions to Harvard's aforementioned dominance of this event during that 1925-40 span, Neil Sullivan in 1934 being the third) in the semis and then edging out Philadelphia's Carter Fergusson, 18-17 in the fifth, as part of a Crimson 5-0 sweep in the final.

Thrilled with this outcome but also chastened by how close the trip had come to never taking place, Barnaby realized that there was a real need to follow the model that had already been successfully established in crew by creating a Friends Of Harvard Tennis And Squash organization, in support of which Dixon immediately seeded the fledgling entity by donating \$50,000 each to a squash fund, a tennis fund and a discretionary squash/tennis fund. He subsequently presented Hemenway Gymnasium (which had replaced the University Squash Courts prior to the 1939-40 season) with elegant spacious Palmer Dixon Galleries providing seating capacity for 350 people behind the two main courts just as the 1960-61 season was getting underway, and funded the Palmer Dixon Tennis Courts a few years later as well. By that time, and starting in 1963, Dixon had been elected President of the Harvard Varsity Club, in which role he continued to serve Harvard athletics for the next several decades.

Two members of the 1927 Harvard squad, captain Herb Rawlins '27 and Larry Pool '28, would engage in a rivalry atop the amateur squash world during the four-year period following Baker's 1927 Nationals triumph that involved a fascinating contrast in styles. Indeed the Rawlins-Pool rivalry during this period was something of a forerunner for the admittedly higher-profile and more extended rivalry three decades later between the power of Diehl Mateer and the shot-making artistry of Henri Salaun, who between them won all but one of the eight U. S. Nationals contested from 1954-61. Pool was a slugger who forever pounded the ball wide and deep, hard and dead, with relentlessly controlled depth and indefatigable retrieving, while Rawlins's game was premised on touch, subtlety and a knack for placing the ball, according to Barnaby, "always after a most deceptive hesitation, always perfectly concealed." It was his pleasure to thwart the crude bludgeoning of sluggers with the rapier thrust of restrained but perfect accuracy." Following the example set by his mentor, Cowles, Rawlins excelled at "twisting" his opponents, engendering an isometric wrench as they fought their own momentum.

He won the U. S. Nationals in 1928 and 1930, while Pool did so in 1929 and 1931. In '28, when the Crimson lost to Detroit in the quarters of the team event, Rawlins trailed Pool two games to one and had to survive a fourth-set best-of-five tiebreaker, 16-14, before then taking the fifth game 15-7 and following up with a 3-1 final-round win over the defending champion Baker. The following year Pool and Rawlins again met, this time in the final, with Pool prevailing in four games. In 1930, Rawlins beat Strachan in the final after Strachan had defeated Pool 3-2 in the semis and in 1931, Pool out-played Strachan in the final after Strachan had eliminated Rawlins in the semis.

That 1931 Pool-Strachan final, after each had been pushed to five games by Sullivan and Rawlins respectively (with Pool winning his fourth game with Sullivan 17-14 before the 15-9 fifth), might have had the most exciting finish to a final in U. S. Nationals history. Pool, after dropping the first two games and then winning the third and fourth in single figures, trailed Princeton senior Strachan 14-10 in the fifth game before running off five straight points (aided by a somewhat controversial let call in his favor at 12-14), the last of them --- on the first of only two simultaneous-championship-point denouements in the history of this championship, Eddie Hahn's 15-14 win over Henri Salaun in 1951 being the other --- when he got to a Strachan corner shot and nailed a winner past him.



*Harvard Men's Squash 1926-1927*



*Harvard Men's Squash 1929-1930*





*Harvard Men's Squash 1930-1931*

That weekend in Buffalo also witnessed Harvard's reclamation of the Five-Man title for the first time in four years, as the Crimson lineup of Andy Ingraham, Willing Patterson, Nathaniel Glidden, Charles Breckinridge and Donald Frame rose superior to Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia (with Glidden's 15-12 fifth-game win over K.C. Kennedy being the key to the 3-2 team triumph) and New York in a 4-1 final. These were the Nos. 2-6 players on the Crimson varsity since No. 1 Beekman Pool played in the Singles and immediately after Dixon's Five-Man/Singles "double" in 1925 the USSRA passed a rule that prohibited anyone from playing in both events. Instead of automatically bringing along the No. 7 player as an alternate to be inserted into the line-up if someone got injured or sick, Cowles decided to have a playoff among his No. 7-10 players for the alternate spot which was won by Barnaby, who was at No. 10 on the ladder at the time and who won both of his matches by a single point to qualify for the trip.

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A History of —————  
**HARVARD  
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————— 1922 - 2010

Written by Rob Dinerman

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