

A History of Harvard Squash during the

BILL DOYLE

COACHING ERA 1992-1999



INTRODUCTION

“Who IS this guy, and what’s with the tuxedo?”

Harvard sophomore Libby Eynon, and her teammates entered Hemenway Gymnasium for the squash team’s organizational meeting in October 1992 still disappointed by the departure the prior spring of revered men’s and women’s varsity coach Steve Piltch, under whose guidance she had won the 1992 Ivy League Rookie Of The Year Award and her team had earned the Ivy League championship. Unhappy about the impending change, Eynon arrived at the famous arena that day possessing a level of skepticism towards his replacement, whom she knew very little about, that only increased when she saw him waiting for the team in the spacious gallery overlooking the two main courts clad in a tuxedo top and black sweat-pants, an unusual wardrobe combination meant to convey the dual message “We’re going to be serious about winning here, but we’re also going to have a good time.”

By the time the new Crimson men’s and women’s coach, Bill Doyle, left Harvard seven extraordinarily successful years later, neither Eynon --- during each of whose three years playing for Doyle the Harvard women’s team went undefeated and had their No. 1 player win the Intercollegiate Individual title, including Eynon herself as a senior in 1995 --- nor anyone else in the college squash scene could possibly have not known who he was. In Doyle’s 14 combined seasons, his teams won 13 Ivy League titles while compiling a 179-7 won-lost record (86-3 with the women, 93-4 with the men) for a .962 winning percentage that is the highest in the history of Harvard athletics. The Harvard men won the postseason Potter Cup, emblematic of the national intercollegiate team championship, for five straight years from 1994-98, while the women captured the Howe Cup, the women’s-squash counterpart to the Potter Cup, also for five straight years from 1993-97.

In the annals of intercollegiate squash, no other Division I college varsity squash coach besides Doyle has ever guided both the men’s and women’s teams to an undefeated wire-to-wire record in the same season. Doyle’s team accomplished this feat FOUR times, IN A ROW no less, from 1993-94 through 1996-97. Seven of his players, namely Vanya Desai and Adrian Ezra in ’93, Jordanna Fraiberg and Ezra in ’94, Eynon and Tal Ben-Shahar in ’95, Daniel Ezra in ’96 and Ivy Pochoda in ’98, capped off a season under Doyle by winning the Intercollegiate Individuals championship (all seven have been inducted into the Harvard Varsity Club Hall Of Fame), and his teams reached each of the 14 combined Potter Cup/Howe Cup finals that occurred during his tenure --- i.e. none of Doyle’s teams was ever stopped short of the finals. During his first several years, the Howe Cup was held as a round-robin, so there was no “final” per se, but Harvard placed first each of those years.

And though Doyle himself has always claimed that in any 5-4 college meet some degree of luck plays a role in the outcome, it must be noted that in the 18 combined 5-4 meets during those seven years involving Harvard teams, (nine each for the men and the women), seven of which occurred during his first two seasons, the Crimson went 16-2, with both the men’s and women’s teams going 8-1. Caprice aside, a lopsided tally of this dimension has to be a tribute as well to the way Doyle prepared his teams for big matches, as well as to the effectiveness of the between-games coaching advice that he and his assistant coaches provided to their charges.

FIRST STIRRINGS

Unlike the pair of iconic Harvard men's coaches (and racquet-sports alumni) who had preceded him, Jack Barnaby '32 and Dave Fish '72, as well as Fish's successor Piltch, all of whom had served for several years as assistant coaches in the Crimson program before ascending to the head position, Doyle arrived at Cambridge as somewhat of an outlier, having never coached a squash team at any level and with his only previous official connection to Harvard having been as a formidable on-court opponent. He started to play squash at age 15 in Rhode Island, where he was part of a wave of contemporaries who began playing at a small club in Newport near the Tennis Hall Of Fame that included the Jernigan brothers, Kenton and Kevin (sons of club owner Sam Jernigan and later mid-1980's captains of Harvard national-championship teams, as was Joe Dowling, another member of this group), J. D. Cregan, Mike Georgy, Greg Zaff and Jimmy Martin. Doyle then attended first Moses Brown prep school in Providence, which tied Exeter for first place at the New England Interscholastic Championships his senior year in 1981, and then Trinity College in Hartford, where he, along with teammates Cregan, Georgy, John Anz (later a Harvard assistant coach in the late 1980's and early 1990's) and Bill Villari, played major roles on the best Bantam hardball teams in that school's history.

Doyle himself was a two-time captain and four-time first-team all-American blessed with a great wrist (enabling him to drive the ball to powerful effect down the line), excellent mobility and exceptional hand speed. He made a big move as a player, beginning with the second half of his junior year, that was jumpstarted by an advance to the final of the prestigious late-January '84 Harry Cowles Invitational at the Harvard Club Of New York, where he defeated reigning U. S. National and Intercollegiate champion Kenton Jernigan in the opening round. His collegiate surge extended through an outstanding senior 1984-85 season in which his team placed second (behind only Harvard and by far the best finish ever for Trinity College at the time), and he nearly reached the Individuals final before falling just short in a five-game semifinal against Hugh Labossier of Yale. Even back then, Doyle was known as a thoughtful, analytical player (though occasionally prone to becoming overly amped up in the heat of match play), qualities that would serve him exceedingly well during the decade of the 1990's.

At the time of his May 1985 graduation, the professional hardball tour, the World Professional Squash Association (WPSA), was in the midst of its most successful period, with nearly 20 stops across North America, and he was one of many of the top collegiate players of the mid-1980's --- including Kenton Jernigan, who won the WPSA Championship in 1990, Jernigan's Harvard teammate David Boyum, plus Georgy, Cregan, Villari and Labossier --- to join the WPSA circuit. During his first post-collegiate year, Doyle was based in southern Connecticut as an assistant pro at the Field Club Of Greenwich, and it was at that juncture as well that he got his initial taste of coaching as a counselor at the Dave Fish Squash Camps at Hemenway Gymnasium during the summer months in 1985 and 1986.

His first noteworthy WPSA results were in doubles, especially when he and Labossier carved a path all the way to the final of the 1987 North American Open, defeating a trio of heavily-favored opponents (namely Jernigan/Boyum, Peter Briggs/Mark Talbott, who had won this event three years earlier, and WPSA Doubles Team Of The Year Award recipients Ned Edwards and Dave Johnson) before losing to defending champs Todd Binns and Tom Page. Doyle and Jeff Stanley also reached the '91 Heights Casino final, out-playing Binns/Page in the process, by which time Doyle was pursuing a business career in real estate in addition to playing on the WPSA tour. During the late 1980's, he also posted a slew of praiseworthy singles wins (including over Boyum at the '87 Boston Open, over Juan Mendez and Alan Grant in Greenwich in mid-January '91 and one week later over Clive Caldwell in Chicago); made a successful comeback from spring '89 elbow surgery; and was elected first onto the WPSA Tour Committee and then as Committee Chair. This latter distinction indicated the respect he had earned among his playing peers after what had only been a few years on the WPSA tour, and caused him to be addressed as "Senator" by some of the Canadian players in affectionate acknowledgement of the head position he had been chosen to hold.

It was also right around that late-1980's period that Johnson ended his time as the head pro at the Southport Club in Connecticut to become the head squash coach at Williams College, his alma mater, and Doyle was offered the vacated position. He began giving lessons at Southport just one or two evenings per week after work but found himself enjoying the teaching and coaching so much that he kept adding nights and then weekends. By the early 1990's the coaching bug was entrenched firmly enough that when Piltch left Harvard in the spring of 1992

to become Head of School at the Shipley School in suburban Philadelphia (a position he still holds, now well into his third decade there), Doyle, 29 years old at the time and eager for the challenge that he knew this career change would represent, immediately pursued the opportunity to head such an esteemed program, successfully navigated the interviewing process and was awarded the position in July 1992.

HOLES TO FILL

Despite Doyle's lack of any Crimson-squash background, he instinctively understood the essence of the Harvard tradition --- one that had over a seven-decade period been passed on from Harry Cowles to Barnaby to Fish to Piltch --- by which Harvard squash players were made fully aware that they were representing Harvard University first, the team second and themselves third. Loyalty to the school and the program trumped any aspirations for individual glory and Harvard squash teams were expected to achieve success with class, humility and character, the goal in each match being not just to win but to play at one's best possible level. Though not himself steeped in the Harvard racquet-sports culture the way his predecessors had been, Doyle embraced it with an immediacy and intensity that made lasting impressions on everyone around him.

This became important in light of the fact that autumn 1992 was actually shaping up as a testing time for Harvard squash. Four of the six first-team all-Americans that had enabled the Crimson men's team to dominate the 1991-92 intercollegiate scene (namely Individuals winner Jeremy Fraiberg, Faroukh Pandole and co-captains Jonny Kaye and George Polsky) had graduated. The women's team had fallen short in the '91 and '92 Howe Cup competitions, and both the No. 1 woman player from the year before, '92 Individuals champion Jordanna Fraiberg, and her fellow junior and two-time letter-winner Polly Butler were taking the fall semester off to pursue independent-study projects in India and Rome respectively. Though the pair of returning men's team all-Americans, '91 Individuals winner Adrian Ezra and co-captain Marty Clark, would ensure a strong Nos. 1 and 2 (indeed, neither would lose a dual-meet match as they alternated at No. 1 all season and wound up meeting head-to-head in the '93 Individuals final), there was plenty of cause for concern about the middle portion of the lineup, especially since several of the slots would have to be filled by freshmen, one of whom, the Israeli-born Ben-Shahar, who entered Harvard after completing three years of required national military service, had never played hardball squash.

As for the women's team, '92 tri-captains Mary Greenhill (an Individuals semifinalist that year) and Brooke Bailey, both of whom had contributed crucial wins in the all-important 6-3 dual-meet end-of-season victory over Yale for the Ivy League title the previous winter that avenged Yale's 5-4 tally one week earlier in the Howe Cup final, had graduated, and Fraiberg and Butler, as noted, would not rejoin the team until midseason. Co-captains Carrie Cunningham, the third tri-captain from the year before, and Kathy Shergalis, and their senior classmate, three-year letter-winner Paula Rand, were joined by Desai, sophomores Eynon, Rosie Stovell, Caroline Birks and Debbie Lipson, and a pair of incoming freshmen, Blair Clark and Erin Dockery. This latter pair both arrived with strong Harvard pedigrees --- Clark's older siblings Stephanie, class of '91, and Marty, were squash captains during their respective senior years, and Dockery's father, John, had been an outstanding Crimson defensive back in football in the 1960's and later a member of the New York Jets 1968 Super Bowl championship team starring Joe Namath --- and a history of having been intense and not particularly friendly rivals throughout their high-school careers.

Doyle immediately got out in front of that latter situation by meeting with Clark and Dockery shortly after fall practice began and calmly but firmly making sure they understood that they were now TEAMMATES rather than opponents. By the end of that season (which the Harvard women dominated, with nine of their 11 dual meets being 9-0 shut-outs and no meet closer than 7-2) both had become valuable and supportive team members, and by their senior year they had become extremely close friends, all-Americans and team co-captains. Shortly upon her return to Cambridge for the '93 winter semester, Fraiberg came down with a bad and lingering case of bronchitis, but even in her absence the team steamrolled through, winning 44 of its 45 matches in the six-team round-robin Howe Cup competition to clinch the first and most one-sided of what would be five consecutive Howe Cup titles.

The team's No. 1 position that season was held by the aforementioned Desai, a Heights Casino product whose family's Hicks Street apartment's dining-room wall was literally in contact with and on the other side of the front wall of one of the club's singles courts. Her sparkling prep-school career at St. Paul's, which Bailey, Shergalis and '95 Harvard co-captain Stovell had also attended in the late 1980's, had included the captaincy of both the squash and tennis teams; a host of No. 1 U. S. Junior rankings and national championships; a spot on the U. S. Under-19 team (at age 15, the team's youngest member) that competed in the 1987 World Junior Championships in Brighton, England; and a feature article on her in Sports Illustrated entitled "Girls Who Squash The Opposition," in November 1988. A serious and long-lasting intestinal illness incurred shortly before she entered Harvard in September 1989 had forced Desai to withdraw for the remainder of that school year after a few months, and this condition, along with persistent lower-back problems, had plagued her throughout her first few varsity college seasons as well.



Harvard Women's Squash 1992-1993

By the outset of her junior year in 1992-93, however, Desai was ready for her best collegiate season, surmounting a series of hamstring pulls to earn first-team all-America honors for the third year in a row and to go undefeated through the regular season and Howe Cup weekend. She then captured the Individuals title at season's end with a solid four-game final-round victory over Franklin & Marshall star Margo Green (whom Desai had trailed two games to one in their Howe Cup match one week earlier before rallying to win in five), just weeks after Green had gained a spot in the final of the U. S. Nationals in Philadelphia by edging Harvard assistant coach (and mid-1980's four-sport Dartmouth standout) Chris Schutz on a controversial ruling in the last few points of their riveting 17-16 fifth-game semifinal. Along with concluding that season on this triumphant note, Desai was accepted into Harvard's Undergraduate Teacher Education Program (UTEP) and ultimately decided to spend the following year away from college squash and immersed in earning her certification to teach secondary-school Social Studies by student-teaching two Civics classes at Brighton High School in inner-city Boston.

The men's team also played extremely well during Doyle's inaugural 1992-93 season, especially in light of those four spring-'92 graduations and the severe midseason hip injury sustained by junior Jon Karlen, who played right behind Clark and Ezra at No. 3 and was lost for the crucial season-culminating month of February. The main challengers that year were Western Ontario and Princeton, and the two



Vanya Desai

Big Three teams got an extended look at each other at the Cowles event, held just a week prior to the early-February Harvard-Princeton dual meet, which a number of the players in the top half of both lineups entered, as did Doyle himself (as well as his assistant coach Jon Bernheimer, a former Harvard captain and Individuals winner as a senior in 1990) at the behest of the Tournament Committee, which needed their participation in order to have a complete 16-man draw.

It turned out to be a full weekend for Doyle on all fronts. On court he defeated Morris Clothier and '88 Crimson captain Jack Polsky to get to the semis, where he won, 18-15 in the fourth, over Bernheimer, then thrashed Rob Dinerman in three one-sided games in the final. As a coach, he provided between-games advice to the Harvard players in the Cowles and the second-tier John Jacobs Invitational, while also bluntly informing Ezra --- who had not wanted to play in the tournament and who, after a listless showing in a first-round 3-0 loss to Princeton's No. 4 Chuck Goodwin early Saturday morning, had made known his plans to immediately head back to Cambridge --- that he would instead be spending the entire rest of the weekend in Manhattan supporting his teammates.

A chastened Ezra helped lead the team to victory the following weekend against Princeton in an "away" match at Jadwin Gymnasium by the same 6-3 score by which Harvard had earlier out-played Western Ontario, but it was clear that both schools would be stiff competition at the season-ending Potter Cup tournament. The Princeton dual meet seesawed back and forth, with a number of tight matches, most notably a pair of split 16-15 in the fourth tallies (for Princeton freshman Jack Wyant against Ben-Shahar at No. 5 and for Harvard's Dave White at No. 8 against Doyle's younger brother David Steere) and including a crucial win that Harvard co-captain Neal Tew secured at No. 7 from love-two against David Kay. Tew, determined not to lose the match even after narrowly dropping the second game, was able to execute one of Doyle's dictums that "sometimes you have to wade through the muck" by fighting his way through the final three games.

Clark's straight-game win at No. 1 gave Harvard its clinching fifth point, after which Karlen, hoping that adrenaline would carry him through his match, took the court to face Alec Decker in the No. 3 match. It only lasted until the outset of the second game, by which juncture Karlen, his hip injury creating sciatica that flared to the point of immobilizing him and limiting him to a handful of points in the first game, realized the foolhardiness of attempting to play through the pain and defaulted, not to reappear in competitive play until the following autumn. Several decades later, in recalling the role that his rookie coach had played on that early-February afternoon in willing several of the Harvard players, himself included, to airtight wins, even when some of them weren't playing their best, Tew admiringly noted that, "In the trenches, Bill was the general, pulling leadership and performance out of his players with confidence and command."

Relieved by this fairly narrow escape but by this time aware of what might happen if these teams should meet again in the Potter Cup event scheduled several weeks later at Jadwin, the Harvard players almost got ambushed by a scrappy Yale squad that took a four matches to three lead. But Michael Oh, one of several freshmen who had to take the place of the departed quartet of all-Americans from the year before, surmounted a two games to one deficit to overtake Eli senior Marshall Miller at No. 7, and Clark, suffering from a bad case of the flu and similarly trailing two games to one at No. 1 against Yale all-American Mac Carbonell, rallied to win in five bitterly hard-fought and contentious games, thereby giving the Crimson a 5-4 victory. In the actual Potter Cup event several days after the Yale meet, Harvard followed an opening-round 9-0 score against Williams by eking out a tough 5-4 decision against Western Ontario in a meet that came down to the last match on court, with No. 1's Ezra and Scott Stoneburgh dueling into a fifth game, which Ezra was able to salvage 15-12.

The climactic next-day final against Princeton before hundreds of screaming Tiger fans had several different twists and turns, as well as some reversed results from the dual meet less than a month earlier. Karlen's absence played a key role, as did the exacting nature of the semifinal with Western Ontario. Four of the first seven completed matches landed in Princeton's column, but then Oh, as he had done a few days earlier against Miller of Yale, rallied (this time from two-love down) to an 18-16 fifth-game win over Kay to even the score at 4-all. This left the outcome to the No. 3 match between Decker and Harvard senior Josh Horwitz, with Decker having just enough extra firepower to prevail, 15-13 in the fourth. It would be the last time that Harvard would not win the Potter Cup until Doyle's final 1998-99 season and the last 5-4 loss that any of his teams would sustain for six years, until the 1999 Howe Cup.

Harvard's disappointment at falling just short at the Potter Cup that season was salved a little bit when the Crimson, for the second year in a row, swept the Individuals one week later. Desai, as noted, defeated Margo Green in four games at Trinity and Ezra rallied from 0-2, 10-13 to come away with the trophy in his all-Harvard men's final against Clark at Annapolis. The latter, to his credit, refusing to be crushed by this excruciating conclusion to his intercollegiate career, would go on to win the S. L. Green Championship (the U. S. Men's National tournament with the international ball) in '94, '97, '98 and 2000, during a large part of which time he was a full-time medical-school student at Columbia, and to spend several years on the PSA pro tour, reaching a ranking just inside the world top 60 before retiring from competitive squash and pursuing a career as an orthopedic surgeon.



Harvard Men's Squash 1992-1993

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