
A History of Harvard Squash during the

DAVE FISH

COACHING ERA 1976-1989



INTRODUCTION

During the 65-year period from 1924 through 1989, only three men held the head coaching position of the Harvard men's squash team, namely Harry Lee Cowles, who led the program from 1923-36, during which time Harvard men won 11 national championships and 19 of the 20 formal intercollegiate matches they played during his tenure; John Morton Barnaby II, class of 1932, universally known as Jack, during whose 37 seasons of coaching from 1936-76 (there was a World War II-caused three-year hiatus in formal athletics at Harvard from 1943-46) the team won 16 Ivy League titles, 10 postseason six-man college crowns and 17 national titles; and David Robinson Fish, class of 1972, a two-time first-team all-American who served as team captain as a senior, whose teams during his playing career won the Ivy League and national college championships in all three of his varsity seasons and whose 13-year coaching career from 1976-89 featured a Crimson winning percentage of .912 (122-9, with only one non-Ivy League loss), eight Ivy League titles, seven postseason six-man titles, seven national championships and the USSRA Five-Man Team Championship in 1983, 1985 and 1988.



USSRA Five-Man Team: 1985

Though forced especially throughout his first few years at the head coaching position after a two-year apprenticeship as Coach Barnaby's assistant to deal with the de facto pressure of trying to emulate his pair of iconic predecessors, especially Barnaby, Fish in his own low-key way forged a record fully in keeping with the weighty legacy he inherited, even out-doing both Cowles and Barnaby in terms of sheer concentration of excellence, as witness the six consecutive undefeated seasons Harvard amassed from 1982-83 through 1987-88 (even Barnaby never had more than four such seasons in a row); the three USSRA Five-Man team triumphs in just six years, a feat accomplished by no college team either before or since in so brief a span; and the also-record 72 consecutive dual-meet victories during the seven-year period nearly to the day between losses to Princeton on February 6, 1982, and February 4, 1989.

Realizing by the end of the 1980's that he could no longer coach both the squash and tennis teams (the seasons having become increasingly travel-demanding, time-consuming and overlapping) and faced with having to choose one or the other, Fish entrusted the squash program to his highly capable former assistant coach Steve Piltch, who would guide the team to Ivy League crowns in two of his three seasons before becoming Head Of School at the Shipley School in suburban Philadelphia in September 1992. Fish has continued to this very day as coach of the tennis team (37 years'

worth and counting), which just this past spring won its 20th Ivy League title, and second in a row, in the last 32 years, a triumphant manner in which to mark FORTY-FIVE YEARS of virtually continuous high-level involvement with Harvard racquet sports since Fish first trod the Cambridge campus as a freshman in the autumn of 1968.

By that time Fish, a Newton, Massachusetts, native who had never played squash before entering the Phillips Exeter Academy in southern New Hampshire as a 10th-grader, had become that prep school's top player and captain in both tennis (where as a high-school senior he achieved the No. 1 ranking in the 18-and-under category in New England) and squash, demonstrating a comprehensiveness in applying his tennis experience to his new sport that made a lasting impression on his teammates and coaches, several of whom, including his classmate (and later Crimson varsity teammate) Rob Shapiro, noted years later that they came to regard him as a "coach on the floor" even way back then.

The 1968-69 Harvard freshman squash team (freshman were not eligible to play on varsity teams until the early 1970's), coached by Barnaby's longtime assistant Corey Wynn, was very strong, with Fish, Shapiro, Alan Quasha and Andover's top two 1968 players Rick Devereux and Paul Brown all being part of a squad that breezed through their schedule against other college freshman teams and the New England prep schools. Fish's strongest memory of that season was of how inspirational it was for him to watch Harvard's top two varsity players, senior Anil Nayar, who at the end of that season would win both his third straight Intercollegiate title and his first U. S. Nationals (with a successful defense to follow in 1970) and junior Larry Terrell, have intense challenge matches and practice sessions on Hemenway Gymnasium's regal exhibition courts.

CAPTAIN

The early 1970's was a positive but turbulent time for college campuses nation-wide, including Harvard (two of Fish's four years ended with student strikes and the campus shut down, with no exams), but the squash team itself continued to fly high, unfazed by the ferment. In Fish's entire three-year varsity career, only one match was as close as 5-4, namely his sophomore year against Penn, when the team was bailed out in the deciding match by junior Eddie Atwood, who rallied from two-love down to handily win the last three games against Penn's Jeff Condon, who had dominated his matches with Atwood throughout their high-school years in the tough Philadelphia prep leagues and as collegians. Rescued by Atwood's heroics, the team, led at various times by Terrell, Atwood, Fish --- who won the C Division for Nos. 5 and 6 players as a sophomore and recovered sufficiently from a bad midseason case of tennis elbow his senior year to lead Williams College star Tyler Griffin two games to one in the semifinals of the 1972 Intercollegiate Individuals before being edged in five --- and Peter Briggs, swept to the Ivy League, nine-man regular-season and six-man postseason crowns in 1970, 1971 and 1972.

Upon graduation, Fish, who had been planning on attending medical school, worked a second summer as the Director of Junior Tennis for the N.E.L.T.A. (now called USTA New England) as the go-to person in charge of transporting the New England juniors to national events, consulting on player selections to regional teams and advising tournaments. He spent the following year coaching tennis first through Thanksgiving at John Gardiner's famous tennis ranch in Carmel Valley, California, and then during the winter at another tennis ranch in Scottsdale, Arizona. He completed his version of the proverbial "year off" after college by traveling in Europe that spring, having decided during the Christmas break to return to Harvard to pursue his pre-med studies once his trip to Europe was over.



Harvard Men's Squash 1971-1972

HAND-PICKED

He did come back to start summer school at Harvard as a special student in the summer of 1973, fully intending to follow up on his decision, but right on the eve of starting classes, Barnaby invited him over to dinner in what turned out to be a life-changing conversation during which he asked, indeed urged, Fish to be his assistant coach for a few years and then succeed him at the head position. Flattered at having been tapped in this fashion to follow the footsteps of someone he so admired, and with the coaching bit already firmly in his mouth from his highly fulfilling experience with the N.E.L.T.A., Fish became Barnaby's special assistant during the latter's last two years. Barnaby's final season in 1975-76 was the stuff of dreams, as Harvard engineered upset wins over highly-favored Princeton teams first in squash, a 6-3 ambush at Hemenway at the expense of a powerful Princeton squad that had emphatically out-played Harvard the season before, and then in tennis over the No. 9 nationally ranked Tiger contingent as a two-part best possible good-bye present to their revered coach. Barnaby always gave Fish a major amount of credit for both of those wins, especially the squash outcome, noting that Fish had put the team on a conditioning program that winter for the first time, citing the beneficial impact it had had (several of Harvard's wins had been long five-gamers) and generously concluding that "a combination of inspiration and perspiration had done the trick."

Barnaby thus rode off into the sunset in a blaze of glory, just as his college-basketball counterpart and contemporary John Wooden had done when his UCLA team had defeated Kentucky in the 1975 NCAA final a year earlier, leaving behind both a legend under whose huge shadow Fish would be forced to labor for years (beginning with a stack of summer-1976 gallows-humor letters of the "Good luck filling the biggest shoes around" variety) and a college squash scene in the throes of a major measure of transition. The truth is that there had been fissures in Harvard's decades of dominance even during Barnaby's last few years --- Penn had led Harvard 4-1 after the odd-numbered matches had ended in '73 and only a Harvard sweep of the four even matches had salvaged that meet. Princeton had defeated Harvard in both '74 (before losing a week later to Penn, whom Harvard had then beaten, resulting in a three-way tie atop the Ivy League) and '75, though Harvard had rebounded to win the six-man postseason event on Princeton's home turf at Jadwin Gymnasium. As noted, Harvard had upset Princeton in '76, though a chastened Tiger squad had taken the six-man event to end that season. So Harvard had had to share the intercollegiate team bounty for several years, and perhaps been fortunate to come away with even that.



Harvard Men's Squash 1976-1977

EYE OF THE TIGER

By the mid-1970's period when Fish took full charge, Princeton had emerged as a truly formidable adversary, driven by their ambitious and innovative coach David Benjamin, a Barnaby product himself who in the mid-1960's had lettered in squash and captained the 1966 tennis team, and his squash co-coach Norm Peck, known as a brilliant squash strategist and tactician, who meticulously charted his players' matches, diagramming exactly in which part of the court each point was decided for future reference on an ever-present note pad. The Princeton onslaught was partly fueled by a no-apologies commitment to recruiting, which Harvard had never had to do during Barnaby's coaching career, throughout most of which the nearby New England prep schools had provided a reliable pipeline to Cambridge; indeed, there was a period covering nearly three decades, from 1932-1960, when the slice-oriented racquet genealogy of both Exeter coach George Bennett and Barnaby stemmed from Cowles, their common mentor, making it much easier for Exeter alums to transition into the Harvard program.

But by the early-1970's, the Philadelphia prep school leagues, bolstered by the vaunted junior-squash program at the Merion Cricket Club, had surpassed its New England counterpart in terms of the quality of its best players, contributing in part to two significant and slightly overlapping waves that impelled Princeton's ascent. The first resulted from the disproportionate number of the players on the powerhouse early-1970's teams representing Episcopal Academy in suburban Philadelphia that chose to matriculate at Princeton (the Bottger brothers, John and Dave, the Page brothers, David and Tommy, and Bob Callahan, who later became the Princeton coach for 32 years starting in 1981, were all among this number), and the second stemmed from the arrival of a freshman contingent in the 1975-76 academic year featuring no fewer than five exceptional players, namely Tommy Page, a Merion product regarded as the most talented American junior in many years, almost a prodigy; Frank Brosens, the 1975 New England Interscholastic champion from Belmont Hill; Bill Fisher, the middle of the three tennis/squash brothers from Exeter; Peter Thompson of Penn Charter, who years later would coach Princeton to the 1980-81 national championship, by which time Benjamin had chosen to concentrate on tennis and Peck was away on sabbatical; and Bob Bolling, a high-school baseball star who became a stand-out squash player as well.

Page, who as a freshman dethroned the two-time defending Intercollegiate champion Juan deVillafranca en route to the finals of that tourney in '76 as a major part of Princeton's six-man triumph that year, had departed the college scene before his sophomore year had ended, but the Brosens/Fisher/Thompson/Bolling quartet, their resolve if anything steeled rather than weakened by the '76 defeat they had suffered as freshmen at Hemenway, formed the rock-solid foundation of a Princeton team that swept to three-straight Ivy League titles from 1977-79 and laid the groundwork for national-championship runs in 1981 and 1982 as well.

The 1977 Harvard-Princeton meet at Jadwin was the real jumping-off point, both chronologically and psychologically, for the years of Princeton success that would follow. As noted, the teams, both of which were a full level at least above the rest of the Ivy League, had exchanged regular-season and six-man postseason wins, the two major prizes in college squash, over the previous two years, and, with this undulating back drop and both Fish and Harvard freshman sensation Michael Desaulniers making their debuts as head coach and No. 1 player respectively in Big Three competition, this meet had an era-defining feel to it.



Michael Desaulniers '80

With the score tied at three matches apiece (including Desaulniers's straight-set win over Callahan) and Princeton well ahead in one of the remaining matches while Harvard similarly led in the other, much of the attention became focused on No. 2 players Brosens and Harvard senior captain and first-team all-American Bill Kaplan, one of the heroes of Harvard's '76 win over Princeton with his victory at No. 1 over Callahan, and, like Brosens a former New England Interschols champ. Kaplan, fully exploiting the harshly-angled serves and drives that had undone so many opponents over his praiseworthy career, resulting in a top-15 ranking on the World Professional Squash Association (WPSA) hardball tour in the early-1980's, took the first game in a tiebreaker, then routed Brosens so thoroughly in the 15-2 second that the spacious gallery of the main Jadwin Gymnasium exhibition court nearly emptied as the disappointed Princeton spectators left to view the other matches, having given up on that one. With nothing to lose at that stage, and just hoping to avoid another humiliation in the third game, Brosens went for broke on a series of successful shot-making forays that gave him that game 15-6, after which, spurred on by a confidence-building "you-can-do-this" pep talk by Benjamin and some tactical suggestions from Peck during the ensuing between-games break, Brosens carried his momentum through the fourth and fifth games as Princeton, which also got two other wins when its players rallied after trailing two games to one (a total of seven match-games-against saved over those three matches), wound up with a 6-3 triumph that served as the launch-pad for the three-year Tiger championship run that ensued.



Harvard Men's Squash 1977-1978

It should be noted that Harvard DID have excellent teams throughout that time frame, their only non-Princeton losses coming at the hands of a '79 Penn team whose top two players, Ned Edwards and Jon Foster, future WPSA top-10 pros, met in that year's Intercollegiate final, and a '78 Western Ontario squad whose narrow 5-4 margin constituted the only Harvard loss in Fish's entire tenure to a non-Ivy League opponent. Page's Episcopal classmate John Havens went undefeated at No. 2 as a freshman, John Stubbs of Milton and Mitch Reese of Exeter were both New England Interschols champs, and Ned Bacon and the '78 captain Mark Panarese (who served as Fish's assistant coach for several years after his graduation) were both exceptional players as well whose luckless fate it was to have their college careers intersect with Princeton's most prolonged period of squash success in the school's history. Benjamin compiled an outstanding 39-1 mark during his four years (from 1974-78) as head coach of the squash team, Peck took the reins without the team missing a beat, Thompson did a remarkable job of coaching players several of whom had so recently been his teammates in his one-year stint, following which Callahan took the position, ostensibly for only that one 1981-82 year while on a break from his regular job at IBM, and wound up at the Princeton helm for 32 years until his retirement as a legendary figure in his own right in the spring of 2013.

All told, during the eight-year period from 1974-1982, Princeton went 81-2, their sole losses coming to Harvard, first in the memorable Barnaby send-off in '76 and then in 1980, Fish's fourth year as head coach, when the Crimson, led by their superstar senior Michael Desaulniers, who never came close to losing a single match while winning three Intercollegiate championships (assuredly there would have been a fourth were it not for the fractured foot that sidelined him from the 1979 event his junior year), won a tense 5-4 decision at Hemenway. Desaulniers held Princeton all-American Gary Fogler to single figures in each game, Clark Bain did the same to Jon Moore at No. 7, and Harvard earned a trio of five-game victories, from Stubbs over Chris Sherry at No. 3, from Rob Blake in a fifth-set best-of-nine tiebreaker with Bob Clothier at No. 8, and from sophomore Chip Robie at the No. 5 position.



Harvard Men's Squash 1978-1979

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