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A History of Harvard Squash during the

# **STEVE PILTCH**

## **COACHING ERA 1986-1992**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Jen Holleran, co-captain of the 1989 and 1990 Harvard women's teams and the National Intercollegiate Champion in 1990, gratefully detailed how central a role he played in her current career as the head of a major education foundation. Jordanna Fraiberg, National Intercollegiate Champion in 1992 and 1994, when asked if he had anything to do with her transformation from unfocused player as a freshman to intercollegiate champion as a sophomore, forcefully responded (almost before the question could be completed), "He had EVERYTHING to do with it." Mary Greenhill, co-captain of the 1992 women's team, lauded the role he had played in enhancing her entire college experience and emphasized that "he coached the PERSON, not only the PLAYER," a distinction echoed almost verbatim by early-1990's four-year letterman Josh Horwitz.

Chip Robie, who played for him in prep school and later became co-captain of the 1982 Harvard men's team, cited the combination of individual competitiveness, team esprit and caring that "made you really want to win for him." Stephanie Clark, co-captain of the 1990 and 1991 Harvard women's teams, marveled at the way he made every member of her teams, whether they played at No. 1 or at No. 9 or on the JV, feel that they were welcome and vital contributors to the overall program. And current Andover Head of School John Palfrey, co-captain of the 1994 Harvard men's team, noting that "he was enormously influential in my life," emphasized "the care and focus on us as students and young people" that made him such a mentor and role model.

All of these former Harvard squash captains were describing with an admiration that bordered on reverence their experience playing for Steve Piltch, whose nine-year Harvard coaching career, evenly trisected into three-year stints first from 1983-86 as assistant coach of the men's team under Dave Fish, then from 1986-89 as head coach of the women's team and finally from 1989-92 as head coach of both the men's and women's teams (the first time one person had ever headed both programs simultaneously), was as remarkable as it was improbable.

The former description can be summarized with numbers that speak for themselves, while the latter is a bit more intriguing. Unlike his immediate pair of legendary Harvard men's squash coach predecessors Fish and Jack Barnaby, both of whom were steeped in Harvard's racquet-sports tradition --- each lettered in both squash and tennis as Crimson collegians themselves, with Fish having captained both the tennis and squash teams as a senior in 1971-72 while twice earning first-team all-America honors in squash as a member of teams that won the national title in all three seasons of his varsity career --- Piltch never played squash competitively in high school or college. Yet by the time he left Harvard in the spring of 1992 to become Head of School at the Shipley School, a well-respected prep school in suburban Philadelphia, a position he has held for the past 22 years and counting, his teams' winning percentages, both for the men and the women, were the highest in the history of Harvard squash. Piltch compiled records of 58-5 (.921 winning percentage), with three Howe Cups (the women's postseason team tournament), four Ivy League titles and four intercollegiate team championships in six years as the women's coach, and 40-2 (.952 winning percentage) with two Ivy League titles, two national intercollegiate team championships and two Potter Cups (the men's postseason team tournament) in three years as the men's coach.

His Harvard teams went undefeated in dual-meet play in six of his nine combined coaching seasons (in five of his six years as a Crimson head coach at least one of his teams was undefeated), and eight of the players he coached won the Intercollegiate Individual tournament either (in six of those cases) while he was still at Harvard or in the next few years after he left. As impressive as all these statistics are, however, they don't even begin to capture either the lasting influence he had on so many of his players, the relentless constancy with which he upheld a high moral standard, the total integrity and caring with which he treated every one of his youthful charges or the philosophy that drove the way he went about his profession. His entire approach was fueled by the conviction that he was, in essence, less an athletics coach per se than an educator who could and did use competitive sports as the vehicle to effect learning, change and growth in young people. He always believed that his players' academic and personal lives were of the utmost importance and that sports could help them find themselves and strengthen other areas of their lives.

Though he did play squash recreationally during his senior year in high school on the one court in the basement of the Brookline Recreation Center in his native hometown in Massachusetts, Piltch's favorite and best sport in those years was basketball, where his aggressiveness and scrappy style first found a forum for the leadership skills that would serve him so well later on. An excellent all-around athlete --- he was also on Brookline High's cross-country

team and its track & field team --- despite his relative lack of height (five feet, eight inches), he then played on the freshman basketball team at Williams College during the 1973-74 season and became a manager of the varsity basketball team in each of his next three college years. His multi-front contributions to the school were recognized in his election as President of the College Council and in his being named a Lehman Scholar for all-around excellence.

Curt Tong, the varsity basketball coach at Williams during that time, was also a racquet-sports devotee who played badminton and tennis, coached the Williams women's tennis team, and often ran Piltch around on the squash court. Sean Sloane and former Williams all-American squash player Dave Johnson, who were the Williams varsity squash coaches during Piltch's college years, both hit with him and arranged games for him with players in the program.

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# THE CHOATE YEARS

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Nevertheless, when Piltch arrived at Choate, a well-known New England prep school in Wallingford, Connecticut, in the fall of 1977, shortly after graduating from college the previous spring, to teach Psychology and Math, it was with the full expectation that he would be coaching in the school's basketball program that winter. Indeed, the athletics director promptly penciled him in as coach of the JV boy's basketball team. But that fall Piltch stopped by the squash courts fairly regularly, as did the aforementioned Chip Robie, a Choate senior, President of the Student Council and the squash captain-elect, who often visited the squash courts in the late afternoons after soccer practice had ended to work on his strokes and ready his squash game for the upcoming season. The two took to hitting and eventually to practice games and Robie, along with the school's longtime girls' varsity squash coach (and highly respected history teacher) Tom Generous, increasingly impressed with Piltch's understanding of the game and visible improvement from one week to the next, and aware as well that Choate's varsity boys' squash coach Bill Cobbett would be away on a one-year sabbatical throughout that 1977-78 school year, forcefully and successfully recruited Piltch to step into the void and coach the boys' team that year.

Choate squash had been devastated by a fire that ruined the courts late in the winter of 1976, causing the team to have to play all of its matches during the following 1976-77 season on the road and to journey to nearby New Haven several times per week to practice on the Yale courts, a generous gesture on Yale's part but a difficult arrangement for everyone involved. But by the outset of the 1977-78 school year, the Choate athletic facility had been rebuilt, including 10 new squash courts, whose sparkling presence seemed to symbolize a whole new era in Choate squash, a magical time throughout Piltch's six-year stay there, during which he became best friends with Generous (not by any means always the case in this type of charged prep-school setting, where turf battles for court time pitting the boys' and girls' coaches against each other have frequently arisen over the years) and their respective teams enjoyed a special bond as together they generated the best combined extended run in the history of the school and perhaps even in the history of New England Prep School Squash.

Starting in 1979, the girls' team, paced at various times by a number of players (including Jennifer Meagher, Kathy Klein, Sophie Porter, Phoebe Trubowitz, Diana Staley, Martha Winnick, Jane Dietz, Jackie Corrigan and Lucy Miller) who later became prominent members, and in some cases captains, of contending college teams, won the New England Interscholastic team title outright four straight years. The synergy between the teams may have been best exemplified on a cold Saturday afternoon in early February 1980, when the boys team was trailing three matches to two in an away match against a tough Belmont Hill squad led by Greg Zaff, who 10 years later would win the 1990 Xerox Canadian Open, one of the biggest events on the World Pro Squash Association (WPSA) tour, and rise to No. 2 in the rankings. In the last two matches on court, both Choate players dropped their opening games, when suddenly the girls team, the reigning New England champions at the time, which had finished their match at a club in Boston, arrived in the gallery, whereupon the two Choate players, boosted by the much more vocal and decidedly feminine support they were now receiving, rallied to give Choate a 4-3 victory.

A few weeks later at the New England Interschols at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, the team, inspired by having watched the U. S. hockey team's historic win over the prohibitively favored Russians at Lake Placid in the highlight moment of that year's Olympics in their hotel room the evening before, swept to victory. The No. 1 player, Jeff Sultar defeated Exeter's Jim Faulkner in the final round of the tournament for No. 1 players (Zaff, who one year later would be Sultar's teammate at Williams, had been eliminated in the quarterfinals); Jeff Kahle, later the Yale captain, won the event for No. 2 players; and Tony Cheung, who would subsequently make the varsity at Brown, claimed the flight for No. 3 players.

Choate would also capture this tournament three years later in 1983, Piltch's last year at Choate, with Keen Butcher, who would become a solid WPSA pro and two-time (in 1995 and 1996) U. S. Nationals champ, winning at No. 1; his senior classmate Joe Dowling, who switched on and off with Butcher at the No. 1 slot all season, taking the No. 2 tourney; and Stefan Niedzwiedzki, a talented junior player who went on to play for Fordham, completing a second Choate sweep in four years by winning the draw for No. 3 players. Butcher and Dowling would meet head-to-head one year later as college freshmen in the 1984 Harvard-Princeton dual meet at No. 9, with Dowling's win helping Harvard defeat its Ivy League rival 8-1. Both eventually became co-captains of their respective Ivy League teams and each earned all-Ivy and all-American honors as well.

Piltch, who midway through his years at Choate was also appointed Form Dean for the Class of 1983, responsible for academic, personal and disciplinary issues, prided himself on fielding the best-conditioned teams --- Choate's 11-laps-to-a-mile indoor track is fortuitously positioned right near the squash courts, and he frequently had his players run early-morning sprints following a sprint-one-lap/jog-one-lap pattern which at least in part accounted for their extremely high success level in five-game matches. He would later adopt this approach at Harvard as well. He also became known for transforming superior all-around athletes who hadn't previously played squash into solid members of the Choate varsity. The best case in point of the latter phenomenon during Piltch's years at Choate was probably Michael Breed, Class of 1981, a stand-out in tennis, baseball, soccer and hockey (and currently a golf pro who frequently appears on the Golf Channel), who had never played squash prior to coming to Choate but who by his junior year was playing right behind the Sultar/Kahle/Cheung triumvirate on the 1980 squad that swept through that year's New England Interschols in such decisive fashion.

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## THE MOVE TO HARVARD

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By the time that Piltch arrived at Harvard in September 1983 to pursue a Masters in Education with an emphasis in Counseling and Consulting Psychology at the Harvard Graduate School Of Education (where he met his future wife, Sunny, who was in the same Masters program, on the first day of orientation), his reputation as a respected squash coach had been fully established, at least on the prep-school level, and he had gotten to know Coach Fish, who promptly named him as assistant coach of the men's team, from their several years working together in a squash summer camp that Fish had been running since the late 1970's in New England.

The Harvard varsity, led by Kenton Jernigan and David Boyum, for years the crown jewels of the USSRA Junior Program and future top-10 WPSA pros, had gone undefeated the year before (with Jernigan defeating his teammate Boyum in the finals of both the U. S. Nationals and Intercollegiate Individuals) and would do so for five additional years as well, the longest such skein in Harvard squash history. The team's top players during that extended period would include not only Jernigan and Boyum but also Richard Jackson, the Canadian Junior champion; Russ Ball, who as a senior would reach the final of the 1988 U. S. Nationals; Dowling, captain of the 1987 team; and Darius Pandole, a lithe and graceful Indian-born star.

Indeed, throughout much of that span, the fiercely competitive intra-squad challenge matches would represent the stiffest test that the players would face all season, to the extent that there were actually a few dual meets during the mid-1980's in which Jernigan, the reigning national champion, found himself playing at No. 3 on his own college team! Throughout Piltch's three years as assistant men's coach, Harvard never had a dual meet in which the score was closer than 6-3, and the team lost only 20 individual matches during that time frame while going 32-0 in dual-meet competition and annexing as well the USSRA Five-Man Team Championship in 1985, even though the top several players were entered in the Individual tourney (which Jernigan won for the third straight time) and hence were not eligible to participate in the Five-Man competition.

In addition to his responsibilities with the men's team, Piltch during that mid-1980's period was engrossed in his graduate work --- he spent the 1983-84 academic year as a learning skills tutor for learning-disabled, dyslexic and cerebral palsy students in the Brookline Public Schools system while earning his first Masters degree, then taught math for the next two years in the Brookline Public Schools and Newton Public Schools before re-enrolling at Harvard in September 1986 to pursue further graduate work in the form of a second Masters in Education, this time with an emphasis in Secondary Administration, which he completed in 1988 --- and in helping women's head coach Priscilla Choate with the Harvard women's team as well.

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## THE RIGHT WAY

Consequently when Coach Choate left Harvard in the summer of 1986, Piltch was the natural choice to take over the women's head coaching position, as he had become so familiar with the games of the varsity women players and gained such a good rapport with many of them in their informal practice sessions, that Ingrid Boyum, David's younger sister and a co-captain of the 1987 team, characterized his transition into his new position as "seamless," literally the exact term that 1990 men's team captain Jon Bernheimer would select in describing Piltch's move into the men's head coaching slot three years later.

The climactic match of his inaugural 1986-87 season was the early-February meet against a powerful Princeton contingent led by Demer Holleran, who the year before as a freshman had overwhelmed Harvard's Diana Edge in the Individuals final. Edge, an Ottawa native, was a stand-out all-around athlete (in addition to winning the Canadian Junior squash championship, played with the softball, she was an excellent badminton player and had as a "walk on" not only made Harvard varsity cross-country team but been one of its best performers as a freshman in the fall of 1984) who, however, had played hardball squash only a handful of times prior to entering Harvard. She had progressed quickly in the hardball game by the time this meet occurred midway through her junior year, but she had incurred a severely sprained ankle a few weeks beforehand and was in no shape to play any match, let alone one against the fearsome Holleran.

There have been instances in the annals of intercollegiate squash in which coaches have had a badly-injured No. 1 player go on court and default early in the first game, sacrificing themselves and pushing their teammates further down in the lineup, thereby enhancing their chances of winning their respective matches. Certainly Ingrid Boyum, Harvard's No. 2 player behind Edge, would have had a much better chance of beating Princeton No. 2 Sue Safford than she did of defeating Holleran, and the odds of Harvard winning Piltch's first-ever Big Three meet had already been further compromised by a serious late-autumn knee injury to freshman Hope Nichols that had required season-ending surgery.



*Harvard Women's Squash 1986-1987*

It is a testament to Piltch's life-long commitment to doing things the right way, both for its own sake and as an example for the student-athletes that look to him for leadership, that he never even considered utilizing this somewhat Machiavellian option. Boyum fell to Holleran three-love, as did freshman Jenny Holleran, Demer's younger sister, to Safford in five long games, and Princeton secured points in the Nos. 8 and 9 slots as well. But Harvard courageously swept the Nos. 3 through 7 positions and left the hostile Jadwin Gymnasium venue with an honorably earned and highly fulfilling 5-4 victory en route to a 12-0 season-end record and a national team championship in Piltch's first year as a Harvard head coach.

Harvard countered Princeton's wins at the top two and bottom two positions with victories by Sheila Morrissey, Emily Knowlton and Fern Ward at the Nos. 5-7 spots, each of them requiring either a fourth game or an overtime-session win. At No. 4, in a battle between former Choate teammates Lucy Miller and Jane Dietz, Miller was able to tie the score for Harvard, 18-17 in the fourth, with all three of the games she won going to a tiebreaker. This left the issue in the hands of No. 3 players (and future sisters-in-law!) Mariana Chilton, a Harvard freshman whose self-described on-court volatility made many of her matches unpredictable as to the outcome, and Ann Sawyer, who trailed two games to one but then dominated the fourth game 15-6. The fifth seesawed tensely along until very late, when a match-closing string of Chilton winners enabled her to claim victory by a 15-11 tally.

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