

Health & Recreation

INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS

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Summer Fun



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Wonderful Leeches(!)

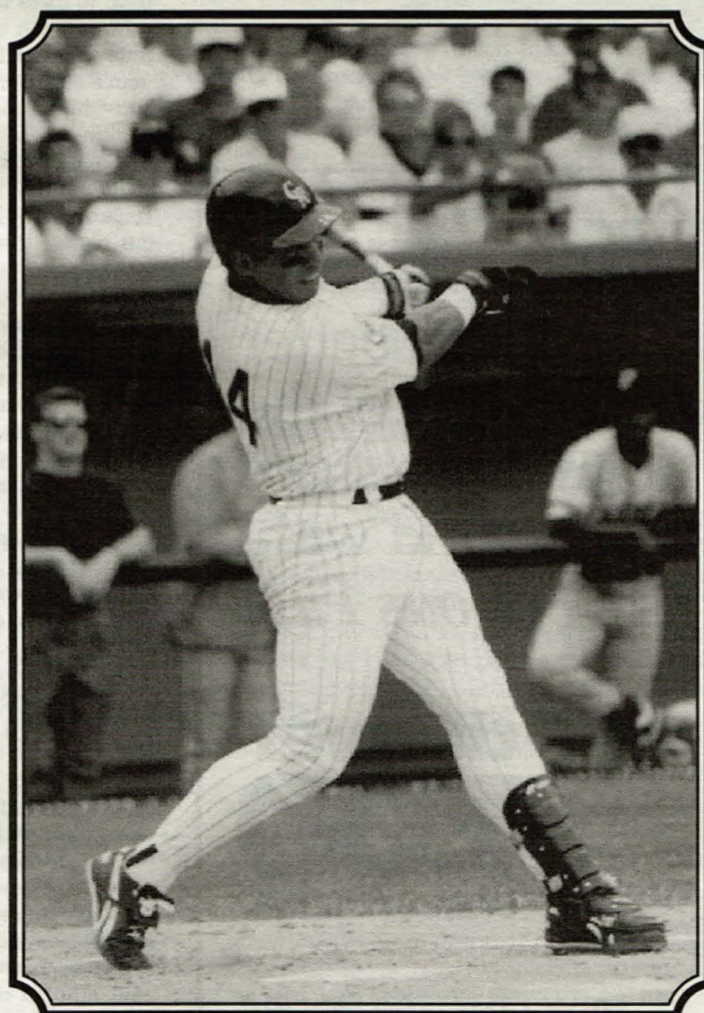
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Green Gables tennis pro Irwin Hoffman Lifetime dedicated to a 'lifetime sport'

By CHRIS LEPPEK
IJN Assistant Editor

Some people look at a tennis court and see merely a tennis court.

Not Irwin Hoffman.

"I look at a tennis court like a Rembrandt," he says with a faraway look in his eye. "It's a love affair."

Some people watch, or even play, a tennis match, and that's all they see.

Something entirely different happens when Hoffman has a racket in his hands.

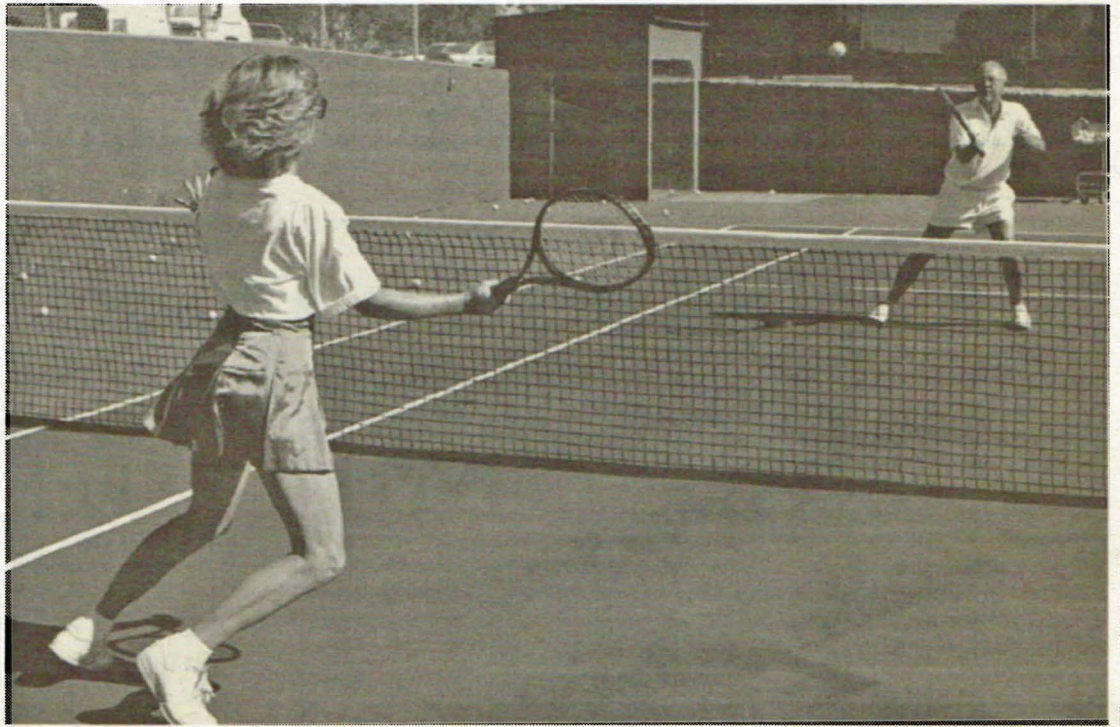
"You go out there and you're part of a symphony. You're part of nature. I try to make kids understand that. You've got to make them feel the beat of the game; to make them feel the music, the Rachmaninov, the Beethoven."

Comparing tennis to high art might strike some as hyperbole, but have no doubt as to Hoffman's sincerity. Tennis is more to him — much more — than a form of recreation, a sport or a profession.

Hoffman says he agrees with the anonymous person who once said of the game: "It's not a job, it's a life."

Tennis is, in fact, the life that Hoffman has chosen to live. That may seem incongruous, considering that he is an accomplished and respected teacher of mathematics and computer science.

Among the many honors bestowed upon him during his nearly 30-year career at George Washington High School [he retired four years ago] are the Colorado Teacher of the Year Award and the 1983 Presidential Award from President Reagan. His reputation as a student motivator and innovative instructor have made Hoffman a national



Photos: Bob Weinberg

Always the teacher, Irwin Hoffman helps aspiring tennis player



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Still, it is the tennis dimension of his admittedly "bifurcated career" that seems to inspire the greatest passion in Hoffman. It's evident as he proudly displays the professional court he's had installed, amidst his wife Jacquie's gorgeous gardens, in the backyard of his Greenwood Village home.

The court was specially designed by an architect, Hoffman says, to eliminate any shadows that might adversely affect how the game is played.

It is a fully professional court, but most of its users are students. In the spring and fall especially, these tennis hopefuls are frequent visitors to the Hoffman residence. In the summer — when school vacation permits Hoffman to happily devote as many as 12 hours to tennis daily — they usually receive their instruction at Green Gables Country Club, where Hoffman has been the resident tennis pro for 36 years.

A good many among the hundreds of students Hoffman has taught in the intervening years have become

Colorado state champions at various competitive levels. A good many others have themselves become tennis pros at regional tennis clubs and centers. Among the 140 or so kids currently under his tutelage at Green Gables, more than half are competing on teams.

Hoffman's students and ex-students are seemingly everywhere on the regional tennis circuit, and those in the know don't find that surprising.

He teaches tennis as well as, if not better than, he teaches mathematics.

Fellow tennis pro Stephanie Hagan, club professional at the Athletic Club of Monaco (formerly Racquet World) calls Hoffman "the most marvelous teacher I've ever seen. We all know what a great math teacher he is, but he can relate his teaching talents to the courts. I was a player before I was a teacher, and it's hard learning how to teach. I've tried to mold myself after him."

Ms. Hagan is one of several area pros who continue to rely on Hoffman's expertise, for example, with individual students experiencing difficulties.

"Somehow, he can explain to the student how to do it right," Ms. Hagan told the INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS. "He'll say the forehand is wrong because you're swinging too high, or you shouldn't move your body as you swing, or you shouldn't be taking these little steps, or some incredible reasoning like 'your torso is not turning the right way.' He's so excited about getting the beginning or average person to be able to play this game for a lifetime."

A measure of Hoffman's skill, his colleague relates, is the stamp his teaching puts on each of his students. "I can put 50 players in front of you and in 10 minutes you'd be able to pick each and every one of his students," she says. "They all have such beautiful strokes."

Ms. Hagan is apparently not alone in such thinking. On a wall opposite from that containing his teaching awards is another wall, this one graced with many awards for tennis, most of which contain the word "excellence."

"The excellence is for teaching," Hoffman says simply, "and teaching is selling. You've got to be a superb salesman in order to make them want the product you're offering."

Country club children just starting out in a tennis program often have an attitude remarkably simi-

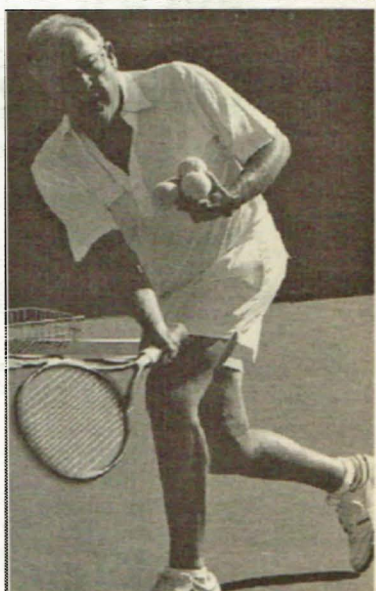
lar to high school freshman just embarking on Algebra I, Hoffman explains.

"Very few people in the educational environment come willing, ready and able to learn what you're teaching," he says. "They came because there's a confluence of pressures that brought them to you. And to teach people anything, they have to want to learn. I don't care who the child is, one of my jobs is to make them want to learn. I've got to sell it to them. Then I've got to make them feel that they're capable of learning."

Hoffman readily acknowledges that tennis is primarily a rich man's sport. For whatever reasons, it has become firmly imbedded into the country club milieu, and the equipment costs alone can keep kids of modest means out of the sport.


But not necessarily.

Hoffman was three when his family moved to Denver, settling in the Park Hill neighborhood. His back-



Irwin Hoffman

ground may not have been poor, but it definitely did not earn him an automatic membership in the Denver Country Club. In fact, the only way the determined youth could get onto the courts at that prestigious club was by serving as "ball boy," a tradition which Hoffman maintains to this day at Green Gables for underprivileged young tennis players.



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Nor did he have a learned and seasoned instructor like Irwin Hoffman to teach him how to play; he is, to a large degree, self-taught in tennis.

Obviously, none of these obstacles stopped him.

For Hoffman, tennis began when "I found a 1918 model tennis racket in my mother's chest when I was 12," Hoffman recalls. When the antique racket soon unravelled, Hoffman restrung it with twine, and went about learning the game from a friend's father and by playing with buddies at City Park.

In the summer, three friends in particular — Hoffman, Nick Siegel and John Shaddock — would sometimes take over the City Park courts for 10 hours at a stretch. And, of course, the players learned.

By the time they were 15 or so, the three of them were able to win a public parks tournament.

At that tender age, Hoffman had already caught the tennis bug he still has today.

"I know what it was," he says. "I was the last chosen on every team in gym. I wasn't too coordinated. I was a little overweight. But I made up my mind that I was going to be good at something. I guess I had a lot of drive in me. It drove me nuts to be the worst at anything, and you don't have any idea what it's like to be last and suddenly you're the best guy on the team."

In short order, Hoffman became one of the best guys in Colorado — a state champion — and by 1949 he had already begun instructing on a part-time basis. All this, mind you, during the same years he spent graduating from East High School, earning three degrees (including a doctorate) from the University of Denver, and serving as a meteorologist with the US Air Force in Korea.

He might have pursued tennis as a national-level player had it not been for his development of that chronic condition so dreaded by tennis players — tennis elbow — which came about, Hoffman says, because he had never had the benefit of a professional instructor who would have taught him how to avoid it.

The condition, however, was never severe enough to prevent him from being an instructor. He got his foot in the tennis pro door in 1957 when his friend, DU tennis champion and then Green Gables pro Clayton Benham, offered Hoffman his very own job.

"Clayton was a great player but not a very dedicated coach," Hoffman says, "and he knew it."

Hoffman accepted the position, far humbler in 1957 than it is today. There were only 13 tennis students at Green Gables during that summer, he recalls, each of whom paid \$17.50 apiece for lessons. In his first year at the club, therefore, Hoffman earned the grand sum of \$220, "and a free lunch."

But Hoffman tackled the job as if he were training the US Olympic team and he wanted every player to bring home gold.

It didn't take very long for Denver to realize that the toughest young tennis competitors were coming out of Green Gables. "I was still an amateur competitor myself," Hoffman says, "and I thought that every student should become a state champion in those days."

And he did get results, producing an inordinate number of state champions. In one spectacular year, one-half of all Colorado champions were Hoffman's students.

"I was unyielding," he says. "I would lock kids on the court so that they'd get their two hours of practice. I'd jump into the swimming pool with my tennis shoes on and drag them out. I'd drag them off sailboats."

In those days, Hoffman taught mathematics in the same driven way. Only the top students at GW could get into his math and seminal computer classes, rated among the nation's best. And he demanded excellent performance from those fortunate enough to get in.

His entire philosophy of teaching, however, underwent a profound change during the 1960s, as integration began bringing minority and underprivileged students to George Washington, whose student body had heretofore been primarily white, upper middle class students.

The new students didn't have the same educational or social background, Hoffman says, and were

therefore unlikely to achieve on the same level.

"I had to face the fact that I had kids who were not going to be going to college," he says, "so I became a teacher of what I could teach. Actually, it was a very enjoyable metamorphosis. I started, empirically, to really understand the learning process."

He became, as his wife likes to say, a "Pied Piper" of youth, both in math classes and on tennis courts, as this more patient and tolerant approach to teaching inevitably worked its way into his tennis instruction.

"As I got older, and recognized that I couldn't make every kid a state champ, I began to see tennis in another

form — as a means of recreation and not just competition."

Not that Hoffman has ever forsaken the competitive dimension of the game — he still produces champions — but his coaching today also reflects an individualized, almost holistic focus.

After teaching a student the fundamental basics of the game, for example, Hoffman works to spot and develop the individual's unique talents on the court. His challenge: "How do you allow everyone to put their own imprimatur on the game? How do you allow a player to grow into that?"

He also began to see the individual benefits the game could bring over and above the gathering of

trophies.

Most obviously, tennis is a marvelous form of maintaining cardiovascular health, and physical fitness in general, Hoffman says. Especially in young children, learning the grace and coordination demanded by the game helps develop a sense of physical space — seen by many child development specialists as crucial for both physical and mental development.

Childhood fitness and coordination, of course, can be gleaned from other sports as well — soccer and lacrosse, for example — and Hoffman expresses no jealousy toward those activities. But he does express one

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Irwin Hoffman

Math teacher to tennis pro

TENNIS from Page 3

caveat: Such team sports for youths should not be stressed exclusively at the expense of what he terms "lifetime sports."

The distinction is obviously of great importance to Hoffman. He has gone to log-headers with the George Washington High School Athletic Assn. over a new policy which permits student athletes to train for, and compete in, only one sport throughout the school year.

of concentration and focus. Hoffman is convinced that regular tennis players make sharper thinkers as a result.

The game also develops social skills, such as sportsmanship and honesty. The tendency of the media to focus on notoriously bad sports, like tennis champion Jimmy Connors, does not mean that the vast majority of tennis players, pro and amateur, aren't excellent sports, Hoffman says.

Perhaps most important, Hoffman emphasizes the individual nature of tennis. A player on the court goes

instant culture," he says. "People want to be good before they even start."

In the world of tennis, by contrast, Hoffman usually trains a youngster for at least three years before the child is even allowed to compete in his or her first match.

When that big moment happens at last, says Hoffman, reverting to his faraway, almost mystical look, "it's like a bar mitzvah."

He is asked whether the religious nature of that term is coincidental or intentional. Is tennis, in other words, Irwin Hoffman's

'The problem with over-emphasis on such sports as soccer, football, basketball and baseball is that such team sports are very seldom pursued by adults'

"They're doing their kids a disservice by not making time to develop activities in lifetime, individual sports," Hoffman charges.

The problem with over-emphasis on such sports as soccer, football, basketball and baseball, he says, is that such team sports are very seldom pursued by adults. In other words, their various benefits are usually of use to an individual only until he or she is a teenager or young adult.

"Physical exercise is essential for our children and physical activity is essential for a long and healthy life for adults," Hoffman says. "It becomes, in my opinion, very important to give every child lifetime sport training."

A "lifetime sport" is one the person is likely to pursue for many years, such as tennis, swimming or golf, "so long as you walk," Hoffman cautions. Such sports not only provide fitness, but are fun, unlike the more strenuous pursuits of calisthenics, weight-training or running, "which most adults simply won't do," Hoffman suggests.

The benefits of tennis, however, don't stop with fitness.

A fast-paced, highly strategic game, tennis also aids one's skills

one-on-one against an opponent, unable to rely on teammates for support. This solitary pursuit of excellence, he says, cannot help but build self-reliance.

"I think self-reliance tends to give you a healthy ego. You can't succeed in this world if your ego isn't healthy. You've got to like yourself, respect yourself."

Hoffman pauses to consider his point, and reveals something of his teaching philosophy.

"What makes you like yourself and respect yourself?" he asks. "Some kids think they have to win, and that's not so. Liking and respecting yourself is a direct function of 'I do my best' and honestly appraising that. I think if I was raising a child today those would be my two goals — to do the best you can, and to be satisfied with that."

Hoffman admits that America's culture of instant fame and seemingly ready-made media heroes often works against the notion of doing one's best, of working long and hard to achieve a particular goal. "Our whole culture is an

true religion?"

"I suppose you could say it's a religion," he says after contemplating the thought, "but in a very broad sense. I just envision *nachas* when I see kids playing tennis, and seeing it played right. It gives me *nachas*, and religion never gave me *nachas*."