



The Papoose features past LMTC president Dick Baum (1975) and Jane Baum with Jan Connors and past LMTC president Vinnie Connors (1974) after the Baums defeated the Connors for the mixed doubles title in the 1973 Fall Tournament—tiny shorts, tiny rackets!
 Courtesy Jan Merwin

50 YEARS OF

Matches and Merriment

at the Lake Mohawk Tennis Club

By Claire Simonelli and Catherine Roy
 of the Sparta Historical Society

Warm Up

It was 1971. Billie Jean King ruled and rising star 16-year-old Chrissy Evert was exciting America. Together, these two women along with Arthur Ashe and Stan Smith broke the chokehold that Australians had held on Grand Slam titles. Young Jimmy Connors was also climbing fast. Tennis was hugely popular—both as a participatory and as a spectator sport—but at the time there were only three tennis courts in Sparta.

The idea of starting a tennis club operated and maintained solely by volunteers with a passion for tennis was the brainchild of Kenny Ernst and Vinnie Connors. Together, they negotiated a long-term lease with Lake Mohawk Country Club (LMCC) for a dirt lot across West Shore Trail, an area which had once been the Lake Mohawk Riding Academy. Next, the duo funded the construction of four new courts by collecting bonds and first-year dues from future Lake Mohawk Tennis Club (LMTC) members, with the LMCC providing a loan for the balance. Both Ernst and Connors served as early LMTC presidents. Membership was initially capped at 120 Lake Mohawk families, resulting very quickly in a huge waiting list.

First Set

Following construction of the courts, outdoor play commenced in 1972. The courts were busy from May through October. Some hardcore players even joined the “Frostbite League,” organized for winter 1975-6 by Bob Urlwin who later became LMTC President. Competition was the name of the game. Match scores, epic battles and photos filled pages of the monthly LMCC publication *The Papoose*.

In 1977, the LMTC waitlist served as a great asset. It had become apparent that mesh windscreens couldn’t block the wind blowing across from Lake Mohawk, so past LMTC president Dick Baum approached a local bank for a loan to build a wind wall. The bank manager asked Baum how many members belonged to the LMTC. Baum answered, “120.” Then the bank manager asked to see the LMTC waiting list. When the banker reviewed the list and discovered 60 potential new members he gladly approved the loan. The wall designed by architect Bill Houghton deflected the wind for the next 40 years.



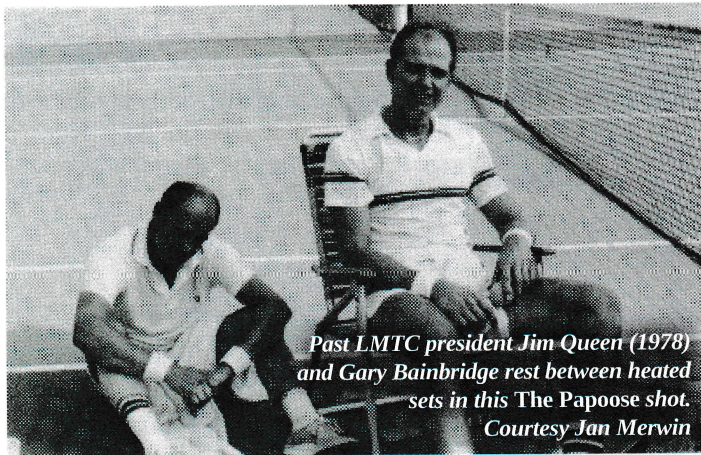
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Tournament early-round matches were arranged between players based on availability, meaning it could be a few weeks from the first match to the finals, which were all played on a weekend. The 1986 Annual Club Championship included a back draw for another chance to take home a trophy, and *The Papoose* described it as the spectators' favorite match, fiercely fought. Gary Bainbridge finally won in 3 marathon sets over Jim Queen, after 2-1/2 hours in 96-degree heat.



Past LMTC president Jim Queen (1978) and Gary Bainbridge rest between heated sets in this *The Papoose* shot. Courtesy Jan Merwin

Second Set

By the time the LMTC recognized its twentieth anniversary, membership had reached an all-time low. America's love affair with tennis had turned into a passion for golf, and the tight-knit group who started the club had largely moved on. Then-new president Roger Cowie and then-vice president Gwynneth Jakober persuaded LMCC to allow five non-Lake Mohawk families to join the LMTC. They then set out to attract more members by focusing on the social aspect of tennis. Friday night Mixed-Up Mixed Doubles Socials and round robin play were added as well as all-weekend tournament events such as the Member-Guest Tournament, offering food and drink to encourage players and spectators.

Over the next 10 years, the LMTC enhanced the social nature of the club through the building of a viewing deck and club house, the addition of a kitchen and improvements to the restrooms. To help fund these renovations, afternoon court time was rented to Pope John XXIII Regional High School teams for two years.

The Club Championship was reinvented as the fun and festive Keg & Brats Tournament, reflecting the Lake Mohawk Alpine atmosphere. Matches were played all day Saturday, and players and spectators feasted on brats and Gwyn's legendary sauerkraut and, of course,

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STRONG FOUNDATIONS BRIGHT FUTURES



The Papoose captures 1977 LMTC Ladies Doubles winners Nancy Askin and Jane Baum; runner-up Carolyn Clark, Frank Clark, runner-up Ruth Voreck and tournament committee volunteer Claire Queen. Courtesy Claire Queen

beer. One year, the Sunday morning winners were both high school students, not yet old enough to drink from the inscribed keg trophy they held!

The Member-Guest Tournament started on Friday night and ran all day Saturday, followed by a Saturday evening dinner dance and then the finals on Sunday. In 1997, one participant who played especially well on Saturday became the life of the party Saturday night. Brian Laddey, a social, fun, long-time member, wrote "Laddey Cup" on a plastic cup and handed it to the player, proclaiming she'd won this award because of her "tournament play, boogying all night, and drinking to the Laddey limit." His proclamation was later inscribed on a permanent trophy Laddey donated to the LMTC, a trophy that was awarded at the yearly Member-Guest tournament over the next decade.

Around 2000, in an effort to bring more tennis to Sparta and the LMTC, then-president Jakober created the Sparta Day Sparta Open. This event was supported by Sparta businesses and attracted players from not only New Jersey but also from adjacent states. In addition to the four LMTC courts, Sparta High School's courts were used to accommodate all the matches for this two-day tournament. Additionally, members Christel and Monika Jakober had competed locally and regionally, so they tapped into their tennis network to attract players. They also worked with the Sparta Recreation Department to create the summer junior tennis program, teaching a new generation of Spartans to play.

Third Set

From 2008 through 2012, this unpretentious little club hosted five Pro-Am Exhibitions, open to the public, with

proceeds benefiting Newton Memorial Hospital. International tennis champions Justin Gimelstob, Tod Martin, Jim Courier, Mats Wilander and Jimmy Arias headlined the events, playing men's and women's collegiate champions and other international champions in singles and doubles sets. Donors could win the chance to receive serves from the champions—few serves were returned! Courier was especially funny and approachable at this family-friendly event. Long-time member Gary Kitchell worked with many on the pro circuit so was influential in enlisting these players. Kitchell has also been known to occasionally show up at the LMTC with famous tennis players including John McEnroe, Tod Martin and Anna Kournikova.

In 2016, the LMTC again focused efforts on increasing membership with the addition of pickleball, a fast-paced game played by people of all ages, including former LMTC members Jan Merwin and Nancy Askin who rejoined the LMTC as a result. Since 2019, volunteers have renovated the clubhouse and landscaping, added a Pro Shop and replaced the aging 1970s wall with an innovative windscreen sporting the new LMTC logo. The four courts have been professionally resurfaced, an improvement funded entirely by accumulated club dues.

Post-Game Interview

Over the past 50 years, the LMTC has expanded and grown, sustained by hard-working volunteers whose efforts keep its annual dues well-below market. Today, the club includes beginner through advanced players from age seven up to 93-year-old Hugh Hauck, who still plays doubles tennis



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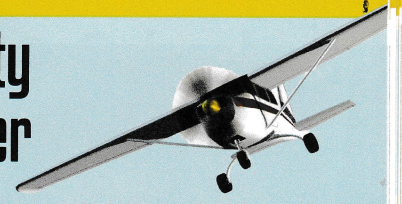
and is one of three honorary LMTC members. With a larger number of non-Lake Mohawk families, a popular Kids Camp, a growing juniors program, free member clinics, a variety of tournaments and more social play events than ever, LMTC is truly one of Sparta's hidden gems.

Friendships were instrumental in starting this unique club and new friendships continue to enrich it. Ron Harrigan joined 26 years ago after having been a professional basketball player. He still appreciates "the generosity

of time from players who embraced me and taught me to play. The joy in life is having friends and camaraderie."

While gathering LMTC members' favorite memories, the Men's Sunday Morning Play emerged as the most-enduring tradition. Former long-term LMTC board member Tony Sigler explained its importance: "The Sunday morning tennis held the club together for a long time. Twenty guys would show up every week. I'd usually bring coffee and donuts or other refreshments and everyone would chip

Flighty Player



In 1978, LMTC member Claire Queen was running a tournament when, on Sunday, she discovered that all of the male finalists were present except for one player—a player who was scheduled to compete in both the men's single and doubles finals. While the other players were waiting, growing more and more impatient, a small plane buzzed the courts. Queen finally eliminated the missing player from the singles final and moved on with the tournament. Eventually, the missing player showed up and was upset that he'd been disqualified. He said, "Didn't you see me fly over and dip my wings? I was coming!"

in a dollar. Nine to noon every Sunday. Now it's 10 to 1 p.m., but the tradition continues."

This article was created with the assistance of many local supporters and committed volunteers. Many thanks to Jan Whittam Merwin, Nancy Askin, Peggy Laddey, Jim and Claire Queen, Dick Baum, Lambert Jakober, Tony Sigler, Gail Miner, Gary Kitchell, John Whilesmith, Gwynneth Green, Gary Bainbridge and Ron Harrigan for sharing their memories and memorabilia with us.

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An ad for the 2010 LMTc Pro-Am features Jim Courier, top men's tennis player in the world for 55 weeks in 1992-93. Courtesy John Whilesmith



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