



(l-r) Dave Romber and Gail and Dick Reilly



Lessons from Camp

On October 9th at 11:17 AM, Dave Romberg picked up the last ball on court two, bringing an end to the RJ Reilly Jackson Hole platform tennis camps - forever.

The players bid farewell to their fellow campers and hurried to their hotel rooms to pack and catch their flights back to the East Coast. After the last set of hugs and handshakes, the camp hosts, Dick and Gail Reilly, quietly got into their van and headed home for a peaceful lunch and a much deserved rest.

The RJR camps have come to an end, but their impact on the sport has been felt for a number of years and will be felt for many more.

In the early 1990s, the Reillys moved from New York to Montana to start a platform tennis dude ranch that included week-long platform tennis camps. Players were pampered by a world class chef and improved their games under the tutelage of the top teaching professionals in the country.

At the time, there were a handful of teaching pros. Very few players took lessons, most were self-taught, and they played tennis on a paddle court. Players were enthusiastic about the sport, but few traveled outside their area for competitive events.

As the 1990s unfolded, the country was still economically hung-over from Black Monday, the Gulf War had begun, there was a spike in energy prices, and the 1991 recession hit. From a business perspective, this was not the ideal time for the Reillys' new endeavor, but they were accustomed to challenges. Over the years, Dick had designed and built an octagonal house, canoed around Manhattan twice, and revolutionized the sport by developing and manufacturing aluminum platform tennis courts. In his spare time, his passion for coaching became evident as he singlehandedly organized a youth football program in Westchester County that served more than 300 4th through 8th graders. On a comparative basis, starting a paddle camp would be a breeze.

Kathy Reilly-Gross, former manager of RJR Platform Courts, said, "My father's guiding principles were hard work, determination, and a passion for helping others. At RJR, we were committed to educating the world about platform tennis. We conducted an industry survey and found the most active clubs had teaching professionals. As a result we produced the Rich Maier instructional video, published a newsletter, and held symposiums to promote the sport. The camps were a natural extension of those efforts."

Looking back, the camps accomplished far more than the Reillys had originally envisioned. They gave the sport a much-needed shot in the arm.

Bob Callaway, founding member of the PPTA, spoke about his early experiences at the camps. "The camps gave us the opportunity to have the complete attention of 12 players for several days to give them our thoughts and get them to practice their skills. Although they had a chance to ride horses and fly fish, they wanted to play paddle all day. The camps included everyone from newcomers to national champions. I still hear from some of my campers and know they took what they learned back to their clubs and that benefitted friends and foes alike."

The camps made the players more lesson conscious. As a result the clubs were incented to invest in their teaching professionals, member programs, and facilities.

Dave Romberg, organizing member of the PPTA and Wilson Advisory Staff member, added, "Every year I taught I noticed how the base knowledge of the players improved. It was clear the club professionals were becoming more knowledgeable, running programs of a higher quality, and more players were participating in those programs."

The RJR camps also created an environment where the teaching professionals worked together and shared ideas with each other. Quite often this happened at breakfast, lunch, and dinner as discussions ranged from sports injuries to Chris Christie to life in Yugoslavia. Friendships and business alliances were built that continued after the camps ended.

Howard Sipe, PPTA member, stated, "I had the pleasure of working with different pros at the various camps. We had great discussions and learned from each other. For example we talked at length about how athletes have different styles of learning, in particular we debated the differences between coaching men and women."

The final offshoot from the RJR camps was the PPTA. At one of the camps, Hank Irvine, Reilly, and Gary Horvath, past PPTA President, long-time APTA Board member, and member of the Wilson Advisory Staff, bemoaned the fact that the American Professional Platform Tennis Association hadn't lasted beyond the 1970s. After several discussions about this topic, Reilly challenged the duo to take action. He convinced Horvath that he was the only teaching professional in the country who had the knowledge, ability, and desire to put together such an organization. He told Irvine he had the responsibility to take a leadership role because he was respected as a teaching professional and player and would help give the new trade organization instant credibility.

Reilly offered to contact a group of professionals who could assist in making such an organization a reality. After much consternation and several additional discussions, Horvath and Irvine finally agreed to Reilly's offer to help. In March 2000, the USA Professional Platform Tennis Association was incorporated in Colorado and its members have been making a difference in the way the sport has been taught for the past 13 seasons.

For more than 20 years, the RJR Platform Tennis camps had a great run. They created fond memories for the players, the professionals,



and the Reillys — and they had a huge impact on the sport. It is sad the camps are over, but the platform tennis community will always be appreciative of their legacy.

To this point, Hank Irvine said, "Any player who has benefitted from a lesson or any teaching pro who is making a living from the sport owes Dick Reilly a debt of gratitude. Dick and his company developed the aluminum courts. In addition, the RJR camps helped make players lesson conscious and hungry to learn the subtleties of the sport. In turn that provided the impetus for teaching professionals to become an even more critical part of the industry." ■

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