

# Tom Stow 1905-1984



"Howard, you were with us last week, you are with us now, you will be with us in the future. You live through Marjorie, Robin and Lani. For all you taught us about goodness, we thank you.

"You were what God meant all men to be—a gentle man and a gentleman. Bless you, buddy."

◆ ◆ ◆

**T**om Stow was 40 years older than I. I saw him teach just one time; I interviewed him once and met him incidentally on a couple of other occasions. I hardly knew him. Yet I felt a love for a man who brought to the game a passion for excellence, who infused tennis with grace, dignity and integrity.

Stow was a coach who had the fire and intensity of a Lombardi. Fierce and unyielding, he sought nothing less than perfection. As a master of his craft, his subtle eye caught the slightest imbalance, the smallest flaw. Few pros produced a more impressive list of students: Sarah Palfrey Cooke, Margaret Osborne du Pont, Elwood Cooke and, of course, Don Budge, who was the best player of his era.

Yet, Tom Stow did not quite fit into this high-profile media age. He never coaxed us with witty instructional classes on national TV; you never saw him dash across center court at Flushing Meadow to hug a victorious protege and he was never inclined to market or franchise his operation.

His was an intimate art, distant from the mass academy—a personal, though often fierce tutorial process that may become obsolete in a quantity, not quality, world. To Tom Stow, schedules didn't matter that much. If a student's backhand volley still had a hitch after an hour's practice, Stow, the relentless taskmaster, would go another hour, then another—indeed all afternoon if necessary. Those who know claim that when it came to technique and stroke production, Stow was the finest—anywhere, any time.

In his youth, Tom was sickly and needed a job where he could take frequent sick leaves. He landed a position as the tennis pro at Oakland's Claremont Country Club. There, he studied the techniques of golf which were taught meticulously. Stow transferred them to tennis. Famous for breaking down a player's game and then building on a strong foundation, he saw tennis as a game of movement and balance where head and shoulders had to be in balance with the hips. A student of sports mechanics, he studied how boxers transmitted powerful punches, how golfers rotated their shoulders and ballerinas achieved balance and fluidity with an economy of effort.

Many of his theories, such as the placement of the racquet head on a volley or the timing involved in preparing for a groundstroke, were only confirmed with the advent of high speed video techniques.

True, Stow was a master mechanic, but he was much more. In fact, one of his students, Doug King, contends Stow was responsible for giving respectability to the tennis teaching profession, raising it above the beleaguered tennis bum image.

Stow did this because as he coached stroke production he also taught character. He challenged your ego and self-image and built character. He forced you to dig down deep and call on all your resources. For some, it was just too much. Many a student fled a Stow ses-

sion in tears. For those who could handle his probing ways, Stow transformed a lesson into a memorable experience. According to Jim Irwin, one of his former students, "No one and nothing else in the world existed during one of his lessons; mixed in with the barrage of criticisms and suggestions were jokes and anecdotes. His total focus was on you. These were exhilarating moments."

"He taught a philosophy of life through discipline," adds pro Steve Stefanki. "He taught you to know yourself, to dig down deep. You came away with an inner strength. There was not one Stow student who acted up. He was tough and stubborn. He taught you to control your emotions. He said that once you have lost your moral fiber you have nothing left."

Tom Stow was a Master. He could have chosen any sport, any art form.

Tennis is fortunate it was the discipline he chose. True, there will be no other figure quite like him, but Stow has left a profound body of knowledge. No, it will not be found in a manual at your local pro shop or in some easily digested video series. Rather, tennis is blessed with a collection of Stow students such as Gene Cantin, Dave Houston, Doug King, Dennis Van der Meer and Andy Salonen, to name just a few, who sustain Stow's legacy every day.

One last thought: how fitting it was that just days prior to Stow's death, his foremost disciple Steve Stefanki, (who apprenticed himself to Stow for the past five years) was chosen to be the coach of America's 1984 Olympic Tennis Team.

Tom Stow will be missed. Yet, the impact of his commitment, his fiery compassion, will be felt in the 1984 Olympics and for decades to come.

## On Being Taught by Stow

I first became aware of Tom Stow at the age of fourteen. I was the last single junior to be accepted in the Berkeley Tennis Club for a long period of time, and Stow was the gruff-voiced head pro and club manager. He had little patience for noisy junior members running around the club getting underfoot. It seemed like a good idea to avoid gaining his attention as much as possible.

A few years later, however, club member and nationally ranked player Jim McManus needed someone on the court to hit the ball back during his lessons with Tom. I was elected.

A lesson with Tom Stow was an experience no one ever soon forgot. Tom had an image of how tennis should be played—for him tennis strokes were logical, simple, precise, and explosive—and by God if you were on the court with Tom Stow for instruction you were going to learn how to play tennis the right way. Period!

I remember time after time hitting what I thought was a perfect groundstroke or volley, only to be buried by that gruff, rasping voice: "No, NO, do it right, do it RIGHT!" And he would grab the racket and try to show you what he wanted, explaining all the while with many references to the motions used in other sports, then, eyes fixed on yours from about a foot away, he would demand, "Now that's right, isn't it? ISN'T IT?!" There definitely was pressure and anxiety. It hurt being forced into the mold for the proper tennis game that Tom saw so clearly in his own mind.

But there were some days when you finally got what he was after. It was like gaining vision after being blind. Suddenly you were doing nothing strenuous, yet the ball would rattle off your strings like a bullet. On service return you would move forward to meet the ball, perfectly balanced, elbows tucked into your sides as you turned slightly to take the racket back, then *crack* and the ball would hit a corner of the court and the far fence before your opponent had finished the service motion. On the volley you would hardly move your racket, yet you would frame the ball perfectly and explode it past or through anyone foolish enough to get in the way. Truly, if you could produce what Stow was after, you found yourself elevated to a tennis nirvana.

Tom's attention was devoted almost exclusively to stroke production during a lesson: Tactics and strategy were irrelevant when you were armed with the sort of strokes Stow intended that you have. Playing properly, you were always moving forward to meet the ball early, stealing time from the opponent, and you simply delivered more firepower across the net until the ball no longer returned. To a degree the opponent was irrelevant. A Stow pupil played to a certain standard, stroke after stroke, game after game, and the winning of matches seemed the inevitable by-product.

There was a certain look to a Stow student, a way of going about playing. I was startled a number of times to have some stranger come up and state, "You're a Stow student, aren't you?"

Tom had very high standards regarding the court conduct: it had to be perfect. He made each of his students believe that he dealt only with ladies and gentlemen, and I think none of us would have dared prove him wrong.

Tom also managed to imply that he only dealt with champions, preferably Wimbledon champions in the style of Budge, so by definition if he was willing to deal with you, you were also a champion, if not now then soon, and you might as well hurry up about it. After a time, Stow students learned to expect to win, and generally did.

Tom Stow's influence on tennis in the United States was vastly greater than people realize. Of course, many people have never even heard of Stow. Yet he was one of the first, if not the first, to have a clear image of how the game should be played: cleanly, coherently, efficiently, effectively. And he was also one of the first, if not the first, to figure out how to teach such a game. His prowess at teaching is borne out by the long list of champions he coached. It is sad that he is no longer with us, pushing and prodding us to play the game the way he so clearly saw it should be played.

—Eugene Cantin

## An Enduring Legacy: Pros and Personalities Taught by Tom Stow

1930-1960

- Bill Crosby**  
U.S. #19 in 1940s; taught at Berkeley Tennis Club.
- Dick Stevens**  
long-time coach at California Tennis Club.
- Fred Earle**  
pro at Modesto Racquet Club.
- Don Budge**  
all-time great.
- Fran Smart**  
Bay Area pro; Berkeley Tennis Club.
- Ken Waltz**  
Fresno pro; son Butch world-class player
- John Gardiner**  
popular pro, tennis resort pioneer
- Dennis Van der Meer**  
teaching pro trained by Stow at Berkeley Tennis Club, 1959-60.
- Bob Harmon**  
Southern California tennis personality; coached by Stow at UC Berkeley
- Gladys Heldman**  
1940s player, publisher of World Tennis.
- Karen Alexander**  
founder-owner of Foxy Lady clothes
- Sarah P. Cooke**  
USLTA #1, 1941, 1945.
- Margaret Osborne du Pont**  
Wimbledon champion 1948-50; six-time Pacific Coast tournament champion.
- Elwood Cooke**  
runner-up to Bobby Riggs, 1939 Wimbledon; #6 USLTA.
- Frank Kovacs**  
1930s clay court champion; USLTA #2, 1941 and Pacific Coast champion, 1941.

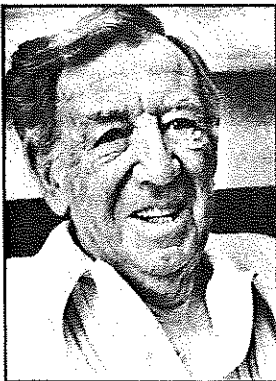
1960 to date

- Eugene Cantin**  
Marin County pro.
- Andy Salonen**  
pro at Berkeley Tennis Club.
- Bill Cosby**  
Stow taught the comedian in mid-70s
- Dave Houston**  
pro at Belvedere Tennis Club.
- Ron Cornell**  
U.C.L.A. assistant tennis coach.
- Doug King**  
pro at Moraga Country Club; NCTA Player of the Year 1979.
- Steve Stefanki**  
coach, Junior Davis Cup and Olympic teams.
- Jeff Hawkins**  
Auburn teaching pro.
- Brent Abel**  
former pro at Moraga Country Club.
- Jim Irwin**  
taught for Stow at Silverado, 1970-72.
- Monda Roberts**  
East Bay pro.

(A Partial List)

## Tom Stow Through the Years: A chronology

- 1905: Born in Portland, Oregon
- 1913: Stow family moves to Berkeley
- 1917: Joins Berkeley Tennis Club at age 12
- 1926: At UC Berkeley, won NCAA doubles with Ed "Bud" Chandler
- 1931-1943: Pro, Claremont Country Club
- 1932-1943: Coach, UC Berkeley Tennis
- 1934-1948: Coached Don Budge
- 1935-1945: Coached many top players: Margaret Osborne duPont, Sarah Ralfrey Cook, Ed Alloo, Dorothy Head, Bill Crosby, Gladys Heldman, Frank Kovacs
- 1942-1960: Tennis Pro and Manager, Berkeley Tennis Club
- 1959-1960: Hired, trained and taught Dennis Van der Meer
- 1960: Van der Meer replaced Stow at BTC
- 1960-1965: Coached Jim McManus to a #9 U.S. ranking
- 1965-1973: Tennis Director and pro, Silverado Country Club
- 1979-1984: Passes much of his knowledge on to pro Steve Stefanki



## Having a hand in his-Stow-ry



Tom Stow (inset) has been teaching tennis 50 years, but his career is predated by this scene-stealer, snapped at the Berkeley tennis club in 1907.

# A friend to tennis' kings and queens

By Abel Kessler  
Times correspondent

**WALNUT CREEK** — He coached Don Budge to the top rung in world tennis, he volleyed regularly with Helen Wills and he ran the Berkeley Tennis Club for two decades.

That's the thumbnail biography of Tom Stow, 78, of Walnut Creek.

Budge was rated up there with Bill Tilden during the '30s, Wills was the queen of international tennis. The Berkeley club was foremost in West Coast tennis — and a revered name to all in the racquet sport.

In a room of his Rossmoor home, decorated with pictures of the game's greats — and one scene-stealer of 1907 players — Stow spoke of the sport he loves. "In the '60s I predicted there would be a big increase in participants," Stow said. But he seems a bit surprised that the explosion was so huge. "I think there are about 25 million on courts now."

Could Budge beat the best in the net sport today? Stow wouldn't be drawn into that hypothetical guessing — but he did provide a bombshell in evaluating those who did compete together. "Tilden was not the best — Bill Johnston was."

Wasn't Johnston the little fellow who often beat the giants?

"Yes, — he was about 123 pounds. Being from the West Coast he developed his skill on grassless courts. He

### you could look it up

was at a disadvantage in the major tournaments played on grass. But when we went against Tilden on hard surfaces he chopped him down to size."

Has the game changed in the half-century Stow has taught?

"Not really. Money is the main difference. Now hundreds of thousands of youngsters are attracted in the hope of making it big. And there are hundreds of teachers where they were only a few."

But isn't the two-hand backhand a major change from the '30s?

"I taught Budge — who was ambidextrous — to use the two-hand backhand. Only difference is that he released the trailing hand as he hit the ball."

That was in the 1933-36 period when the redhead, as Budge was described, came to Stow after winning the national junior title.

"He was not a finished player then — and I didn't know too much about teaching. I worked on the principle, stay out there until you get it right."

That was too modest a statement to let pass. Why did Helen Jacobs and even Sarah Palfrey of Boston — both national champions — come to Stow for instruction?

Stow smiled but didn't answer directly. "There were a lot of books then on the theory of playing golf — but nothing on tennis. I borrowed some of the fundamentals and applied them. There are similarities in the sports."

There was more to it then reading. Stow had captained the tennis team at UC Berkeley and had won a national doubles crown. He started playing at 10 when his father took him to the Berkeley Tennis Club. That's where he and a high school friend, Helen Wills, shared a court many an afternoon.

Could she beat you?  
"No — but once she accidentally hit me with a butted ball and it hurt plenty."

Has the game changed from a spectator standpoint?

"Of course. Spectators pay their money and act badly like some do at baseball games — which is a shame."

Is that a reason for John McEnroe's actions?

"McEnroe knows what he is doing — he uses his antics to break the concentration of his opponent."

It was obvious that Stow doesn't approve of such tactics. Nor does he feel that linesmen should be overruled — and he thinks less of any electronic device used as a judge.

More than coaching the stars like Budge, Stow is proud to have taught instructors like Doug King of the Moraga Country Club. "There are only two or three tennis teachers like him in North-

ern California that come to the top among the many."

What advice for players?  
"Practice — and learn to turn properly."

"Tennis is a wonderful game" he continued. You can play it all your life and it's a great conditioner. It opens doors socially and you can make friends anywhere."

What about competition?  
"Mental conditioning is the whole thing. Budge never got mad — even though he was called a redhead. Actually he was more auburn-haired."

Any suggestions for the tennis world?

"Little tournaments are best for the game. It gives more players a chance to win."

Stow has also lent a hand to golfers as well. In fact, Johnny Miller once borrowed his putter.

"We were neighbors while I ran the tennis scene at the Silverado Country Club. But he never used it in competition to my knowledge. Wish I had had more time for golf," he regretted.

How did he play?  
"I got down to a 12 handicap," which didn't seem to please him. But anyone who indulges in the humbling sport knows that a 12 is mighty good for a recreational hitter.

But tennis still is king in Stow's realm. Recently he officiated at the opening of new courts as Rossmoor where players in the '80s enjoy the sport.