

Kelly's Corner

BY JAN KELLY



Bissell's Tennis Club

Every Court has a Story



Club owners, Jon and Esther VanRider

Celebrating their 60th birthday, Bissell's Tennis Courts in the far West End are popular with tourists and locals and are booked to capacity from dawn to dusk, which has something to do with the quality of maintenance of the red clay courts but also due to the welcoming atmosphere created by owners John and Esther Van Rider.

Founder, Hawthorne Bissell started his lifelong career in 1931 as a teacher at the Provincetown Yacht and Tennis Club. In 1946, he bought some land in the far West End of Provincetown for—get this—\$3,500. He then built the clay courts for an additional \$1,500. The original name for the club was the Cast Anchor Tennis Courts. The name was changed about 1950 to Bissell's Tennis Courts.

Hawthorne had his own philosophy about the sport, which he called "Zen Tennis." He would tell his students, "If you are bitten by the bug of tennis you must be willing to accept your own limitations and desire in order to develop your potential ability within those limitations." Hawthorne taught "Zen Tennis" for 60 years until his passing in 1996.

Jon Van Rider, the present owner, under the tutelage of Hawthorne Bissell from 1976-1995 learned first hand about building quality red clay courts. Although Jon acquired ownership of Bissell's Tennis Center in 1980, he continued his police career as head of a prominent narcotics unit in the Miami, Florida area.

In 1995 Jon retired from the police force and made rebuilding the tennis center his full time occupation. Together with his wife, Esther, whom he met in 1998, they have created a home with a "welcoming atmosphere" in which to learn and play tennis. Jon and Esther work endlessly to maintain their red clay courts at the highest standards of the United States Tennis

Association.

Jon, who picked up tennis in college, has taught the sport for over 30 years. His tennis philosophy builds on Hawthorne's. "It's important that people can walk off the courts with a smile and socialize with their opponent," he explains. "Tennis is a great sport for making friends and building relationships. Tennis is a stress reducer and a cardio muscular workout. Working out while you have fun—now that's a winner." He went on to talk about the benefits of the sport: "Recreational tennis is an investment in good health, development of muscular coordination, personal and self control, social ability, poise, courtesy and confidence while seeking personal accomplishments."

Promoting this feeling, Jon and Esther specialize in a game matching service. If you need a tennis partner, for singles or doubles, they will arrange a match for you [Editor's Note: Jan's right on. As a Bissell's member, I am consistently impressed with Jon and Esther's commitment to get their members and visitors out and playing].

The courts themselves have their own interesting history. When Hawthorne Bissell bought the land in 1946, it was a wilderness. He hand cleared the entire area of five courts and club house with an old sickle (which is still on display at the club). The courts were put in the same year the Provincetown airport was built. Ever the wise one, Hawthorne contracted for his courts to be elevated like the runway, and purchased the rock for the courts from the same place the airport's rock was purchased. He used a particular method: large rock covered with smaller rock, then pea stone and then sand. It's part of the reason why Bissell's courts have superior drainage. Even 4 inches of rain on the courts will dry in three and a half hours. Most clay courts would lose a day or more with the same amount.

The next step in the process is of course the clay surface which is dug from Ducky Noones clay pits in Truro, though the red-dening top layer of red slate is supplied by Wilson and Lawrence in Grafton, Vermont. Five tons of the red slate surface



Bissell swept the courts with this bike—even after an accident broke his leg.



Masterfully designed, Hawthorne Bissell's tennis courts have stood the test of time.

topping arrives at Bissell's each April in 100 pound bags—that's one ton per court. It is then applied gradually by hand. When this task is completed, calcium chloride tops it, which helps lock in moisture. When building the courts, Hawthorne also made sure were not built directly in line but at an angle: the south side is a bit higher, a pitch that aides drainage.

Hawthorne built fantastic courts in the most effective way, and they are still effective. He even consid-

ered the sun, which on the courts never points directly in the eyes.

The individual courts themselves: 78' by 36'. Each line on the court is 1.5" wide and 3,500 to 5,000 aluminum nails are used on each court to secure them to the clay. The courts are watered every day, sometimes twice, and are brushed regularly. Some nights Jon and Esther are out there at 11 pm with flashlights moving the sprinklers. Players start @ 7 am, 6 am in the height of season and people play till dark.

Hawthorne cared for the courts by himself, well he and his 1946 Honda 250 motorcycle. He hooked a brush on the back and swept the courts by bike. It was its own piece of drama. When in his 80's, Hawthorne slipped off the bike it landed on him and broke his leg. He got up, righted the bike and continued sweeping the courts. You can still see the motorbike next to the sickle. For the rest of the season, Hawthorne straddled his cast over the Honda to do the chore. A true Provincetown character, Hawthorne was also a music lover. He would go to his aerie and play "Fur Elise" at any time or he would sit on the deck and play classical guitar. All of this dovetailed with his beliefs about tennis:

"Dress the part, wear whites, look like a tennis player and it will help put you in the zone."

"It's a game. It's you and the ball, not your opponent."

"Today, tennis is for gladiators. 1,2, 3 and you're out. It's not the sport of kings."

"Concentrate, make the game and the continued play of the ball your meditation."

But most of all he wanted people to enjoy the sport. He reminded you to do so every time you hit the courts.

He knew John would be able to keep up his courts after he could no longer care for them. But he didn't know Esther would be there too, helping him, cheering the players and baking the most delicious muffins along the way. Tennis courts need to be cared for with love. They've found some great parents in Provincetown. Tennis anyone?