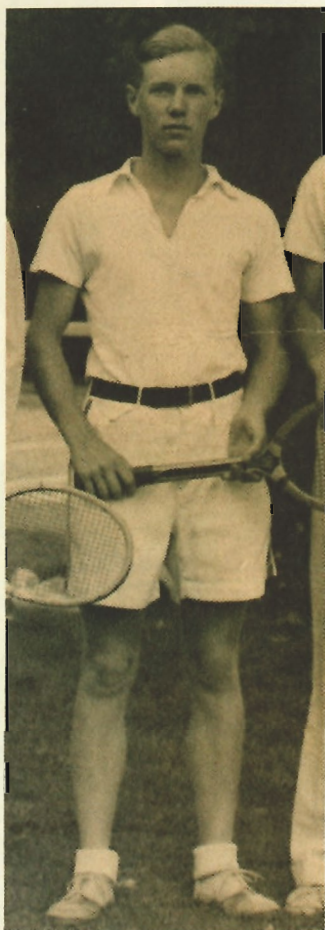


For the Love of the Game

by Paula Vergara



It was a balmy September afternoon when Ted Heisler took to the courts at the Longwood Cricket Club in Chestnut Hill, Mass. The late summer sun in New England proved to be an ideal backdrop for the Men's National 85-90 Grass Court Championships.

Heisler, an 87-year-old nationally ranked tennis player, flew in from his hometown of Lady Lake dressed in his tennis whites, ready to rally. Heisler has had a long history in the game—75 years to be exact, and continues to perfect his talents on a national stage.

Edmond "Ted" Heisler was born in 1920 in Philadelphia. By the age of 12, he and his older brother had sampled their first taste of tennis victory at summer camp. Soon after, Heisler was hooked. "When we went back to school, the tennis director found out we won and called our parents to give them a pitch on tennis as a lifetime

sport," he says. "Our parents said we should play tennis. Back in those days, when your parents said 'do it,' you just did it. So I've been playing tennis ever since."

Later, Heisler was a key member of his high school team at Penn Charter School. He formed a friendly on-court rivalry with fellow teammate Vic Seixas, who would later become a Wimbledon champ and a heavy hitter on the U.S. Davis Cup team in the 1950s.

Heisler recalls, "Seixas beat me out for the number one position on the tennis team." Later in the season, he settled the score when his school had a tournament just for private school tennis players. He played against Seixas in the final and beat him in five sets. Heisler says, "Ever since then, I've been proud to say I've beaten Vic Seixas."

When Heisler arrived at Amherst College in 1937, his athleticism carried him to the varsity tennis team, where he was the number two player all four years. After graduating with a degree in history and political science, his life changed. He was stationed in the Southwest Pacific for 28 months during World War II, where he served as a communications and

radar officer in the Army Air Corps. Heisler was fortunate to not be involved in any combat during the war, and he certainly did not expect to have any opportunities to play tennis during his service.

While stationed in New Guinea in 1944, Heisler passed the time by listening to Armed Forces Radio. One day, he happened to catch the end of a program where the DJ announced, "This is Bitsy Grant, signing off." He could not believe his ears. Bryan "Bitsy" Grant was ranked third nationally and was a key member of the U.S. Davis Cup team. Despite Grant's 5-foot-3-inch stature, Heisler remembers him as "someone who covered the court like a blanket and returned everything."

The next morning, he introduced himself to Grant, which led to introductions to others who shared his passion for tennis. One of these enthusiasts was Col. Nick Powell, who transformed an old, unused L5 airstrip into a makeshift tennis court. Heisler got out and played with Grant, although neither had played tennis in six months or more. He eventually fell to Grant in two sets but treasured the experience. Heisler also played with Col. Powell, who later became very active in senior tennis and wrote the Tennis Code of Ethics. Another opponent was Lt. Allie Ritzenberg, a well-known 1960s tennis pro and coach in Washington, D.C., who was famous for giving Jackie Kennedy a few tennis pointers while at the White House.

After the war, Heisler went on to law school and chose a career in the Air Force, working as a Judge Advocate/Legal Officer. Eventually married with three children, Heisler and his family moved frequently due to his work assignments. Despite the travel, he continued to play tennis whenever and wherever he could, and he even won the Air Force tennis championships in doubles in the 40+ division.

Heisler, who began playing senior tennis more than 22 years ago, competes in more than 13 tournaments each year, including all four USTA championships. He competes in a series of seven Florida-based tournaments called the Super Senior Grand Prix. His track record in this series is impressive, as he won four of the seven Super Senior tournaments in 2007.

The secret to Ted Heisler's success? Keep playing. He also doesn't pay much attention to his age. In fact, after 75 years, he has the same passion for competition as when he first picked up a racquet as a kid. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once said: "Men do not quit playing because they grow old; they grow old because they quit playing." 