



Joe Dennis

From Oglethorpe to 31 flavors and more...Forrest Gump Style

By Dunn Neugebauer

When looking back at Joe Dennis's successful life on and around a tennis court, perhaps Joe himself summed it up best. "I'm probably the Forrest Gump of tennis – I've been all over the place," he said with a laugh. "Though I've rarely left the Southeast, every tournament or every event I can recall, it seems I've been there."

Surprisingly, he was 16 before concentrating on tennis. He was a baseball player up to that point. With not much teaching available in the late 60s-early 70s, his only tennis teacher was "a Poncho Gonzalez book with pictures." Still, he advanced. Starring at Avondale High School his last two years, he went on to become the first tennis scholarship player in Oglethorpe University history. Joe played all four years at OU, mostly at No. 2 singles his first three years before occupying the top slot in singles as a senior. As a junior, he teamed with Robbie Smith and advanced to the Round of 16 in the NCAA's Div. II. His final year as a Petrel, a knee injury slowed him down – an injury that took him out of the game for up to eight months past his graduation.

In post-graduate life, he was a businessman at first. He owned a couple of Baskin Robbins franchises while teaching tennis on the weekends. ALTA was getting off the ground, so he also took to the courts – not only competing in league play but playing tournaments across the Southeast. Joe won titles in all the nearby states – Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, and in Georgia and soon took a full-time teaching job at DeKalb Tennis Center.

His next move was brought on by teaching pro Rainey Hunt, who introduced him to Dunwoody Country Club, got him an interview, and soon Joe was "The Man" at DCC for just short of ten years. "With the ALTA boom, things were starting to grow," Joe recalled. "We went from having six ALTA teams at Dunwoody to 24 in those years. We also brought in the Georgia State Hardcourt Championships and a couple of key junior tournaments. We got it up to a full-blown operation over the years. Before I got there, they had never had a tennis pro that was even there over the winter months."

While there, he also worked with top juniors in the Greater Atlanta Tennis Foundation, working out of Cumberland before moving to Terminus. He also became and remained active on boards, serving for the Southern Professional Tennis Association and ALTA. In 1977, Joe was named USPTA Pro of the Year. In 1992, he was also named to the Oglethorpe University Athletic Hall of Fame. GPTA Hall of Fame honors came soon thereafter.

After that it was back to business. "In 1982 I went to Northwestern Mutual and went about developing my career," Joe said. "Still, when I think back, Crawford Henry was a big influence. I worked for him at East Lake, and he gave me some great pointers. Also, Garland Pinholster at Oglethorpe – he was a great basketball coach, but he was also a top tennis player. Before them, I thought the way to play tennis was to hit it hard, low over the net and aim for the lines. I had no idea of margins." Joe lives and works in Gainesville, with his wife Patty. Now Joe has time to sit on the bench – Forrest Gump style – while reflecting on his days. Yes, he's been all over the place, and has made an impact on many people in his travels. But regardless of how you look at it - whether as a businessman or in the tennis industry - his adventures have proven more than successful.