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A Death In Tennis

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How a 1940 California Tragedy Inspired a 69-Year Tradition Of Celebrating Sportsmanship

By JOHN MARTIN
CORONADO, Calif —
The pallbearers at Bobby Carrothers' 1940 funeral were young athletes, strong, vibrant, physically imposing, still in their late teens.

Ted Schroeder and Douglas Woodbury were top national junior tennis players from Los Angeles. Harper Ink Jr. was a highly ranked tennis player from San Diego.

At the church, the minister praised Carrothers' virtues: "Through it all, in every circumstance, in defeat, in victory, Bob was a gentleman, modest, indeed, almost shy; yet he gave his very best on the court and in life."

At 18, Carrothers had earned a reputation as one of the most accomplished national junior tennis champion since Don Budge.

Carrothers' victories came at a time of prolonged California dominance in junior tennis. Budge of Oakland won the junior title in 1933, Jack Kramer of Los Angeles won in 1939, and Carrothers of Coronado won in 1940.

Kramer and Carrothers were the seventh and eighth consecutive Californians to win the national junior championship.

But suddenly, Carrothers was gone.

On October 18, 1940, he and three University of Southern California classmates were driving south to



The San Diego Union, Evening Tribune headlines; American Lawn Tennis, Nov., 1940

CHAMPIONS: Bob Carrothers, right, accepts the 1940 National Junior Tennis Championship trophy from Don Budge, the 1933 champion. "Had he lived," said Jack Kramer, "in my opinion, he would have been the best of his time." Carrothers died at 18 in a 1940 auto accident.

spend a weekend at home in San Diego.

As they entered Rose Canyon, a winding stretch of Highway 101 north of the city, a tire blew out.

The car "flipped over once, hit on its roof, and landed back on its wheels," said John Ross, 87, the driver, now a retired pharmacist and den-

tist living in Tulare, CA.

Carrothers was crushed beneath the lid of an outside seat in the rear of the car and died of multiple injuries.

When Carrothers' aunt learned of his fatal accident, she started driving from Idaho to California to console his parents and was killed in an auto accident 25 miles from her home in Pocatello.

During his son's burial, Carrothers' father tried to climb into the grave, according to Tom Rice, a high school classmate. Mourners restrained him.

So much grief attached to the tragedy that Harper Ink Sr., a San Diego businessman, began looking for a way to break the spell of doom and loss.

Ink was the tennis patron who had paid for some of Carrothers' trips to national tournaments. Beginning in 1935, Ink had sponsored an interscholastic tournament in San Diego. The event was wildly popular.

"There was no entry fee," recalled Ben Press, a friend of Carrothers who became a successful teaching pro, "and you got two new balls to play with. And the loser got to keep the balls. So everybody who owned a racquet played in the tournament. It was wonderful."

After Schroeder Won 1942 U.S. Men's Championship, a Visit to Coronado

The year after Carrothers' death, Ink introduced a new category of competition: sportsmanship. He donated a large plaque with space for the names of 25 recipients.

In 1941, when the eight finalists (in four divisions) posed for pictures, a ninth player, Arlene Pratt of Grossmont High School, stood among them holding the first Robert D. Carrothers' Sportsmanship Award.

Today, the names of 69 players appear on a pair of large Carrothers' plaques at the Barnes Tennis Center in San Diego.

Over the years, from a modest beginning, the Carrothers Award has transformed a bitter family tragedy into a bright athletic tradition.

The 1942 winner, Press, became Maureen Connolly's mixed doubles partner and head pro at the Hotel Del Coronado.

The 1945 winner, Jean Doyle, won 50 USTA championships as a player, college coach, and senior competitor.

The 1954 winner, Franklin Johnson, served as president of the United States Tennis Association in 2005-06.

The 1965 winner, Roy Barth, played on the men's tour and today directs tennis at the Kiawah Island Resort in South Carolina.

The 1977 winner, Roger Knapp, won All-American honors twice at USC and coached successfully at USC and Drake University.

By honoring the best young players for their sportsmanship, the award has nurtured pride and accomplishment for nearly seven decades.

Scores of winners, successful men and women, have fanned out across the country, living by this spring in 36 communities in 11 states, from California to Florida.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, knowledge of Carrothers' accomplishments faded quickly. Most winners were told only that he had been an exceptional player.

"I had heard that he died in an accident," said Bill Jack, the 1956 winner who is a retired banker living in La Canada, CA.

The 1999 winner, Denis Kolenovic, said "I figured he must have been a good guy if he was giving out a sportsmanship award."

Three years ago, players and patrons established a San Diego Tennis Hall of Fame. Among its early induc-



Western Tennis, March 1940

CHAMPION: Bob Carrothers won the 1940 Dudley Cup, a prized Southern California interscholastic championship in Santa Monica.

tees were Maureen Connolly, the first woman and only the second player (after Budge) to win all four major championships (Wimbledon, France, Australia and the United States) in a single year (1953); Karen Hantze Susman, the 1962 Wimbledon champion; Brian Teacher, the 1980 Australian Open champion, and Michael Chang, the 1989 French Open champion.

Soon, two older inductees, Press and Fred Kinne, a San Diego newspaperman respected as a player, teacher, and patron, suggested Carrothers for induction.

But even the hall's founder and president, Larry Belinsky, himself a Carrothers Award winner in 1972, needed convincing. While he thought the idea had merit, he argued that there was too little documentary evidence of achievement. In the early stages of the hall's formation, Carrothers's chances of being inducted "weren't very strong. We just never had anything on him," Belinsky said.

Then, last July, the hall began an informal search for information. In March, Belinsky and five fellow members of an induction committee began studying a 17-page report containing newspaper and magazine clippings from the 1940s and transcripts of interviews conducted with nearly a dozen of Carrothers' contemporaries in and out of tennis. (Disclosure: This writer volunteered as a researcher.)

The result, Belinsky said, reversed reservations about Carrothers.

By the time of the committee's first meeting on March 10, Belinsky was growing optimistic: "I would say his

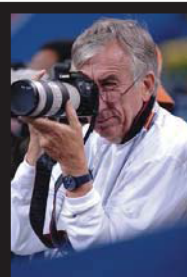
(Carrothers) chances are very good."

What brought Carrothers to the threshold was the discovery that his peers – the game's top players of the 1940s and 1950s – believed that it was "Gentleman Bob" who would someday become the world's finest tennis player.

"Had he lived," said Jack Kramer, 88, of Los Angeles, "in my opinion (Carrothers) would have been the best of his time." That was Kramer's time, when he became one of the game's top players and the early practitioner and promoter of professional tennis.

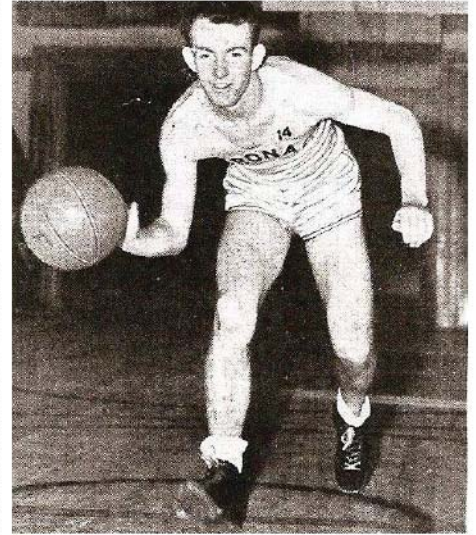
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Editor: John Martin

Who Was Bob Carrothers? Glimpses from a High School Yearbook



RISING STAR: Carrothers won the 1937 U.S. boys title and 1940 U.S. junior boys title. He played Coronado High School basketball and tennis. He sits in front row right, center photo. His teammate, Sevy Molino, far left, called Carrothers serve “blistering.” Carrothers entered USC in 1940 as a freshman, but died in an auto accident the following month.

“It seemed like he was a level above the rest of us,” said Vic Seixas, 85, who lives in Mill Valley, Calif. Seixas lost to Carrothers in the 1940 National Interscholastic Championships.

“He beat me pretty soundly. Everybody was talking about him in the tennis world. He was so far ahead of us that it seemed like he would go very far in tennis,” said Seixas, who won the Wimbledon Championship in 1953 and the U.S. Men’s Singles Championship at Forest Hills in 1954.

“He had an incredibly good backhand,” said Budge Patty, 84, who lives in Lausanne, Switzerland, and won both the Wimbledon and French Championships in 1950. “He was a terrific player.”

Even after nearly 70 years, Kramer had no trouble recalling the fine points of Carrothers’ game:

“He had all of the strokes to be a helluva grass court player, and do well on the concrete,” he said. The two never met in a tournament but practiced together at the Los Angeles Tennis Club.

Their sessions were arranged by Perry T. Jones, the powerful executive who controlled Southern California junior tennis. He was Carrothers’ most influential supporter. Jones and Kramer both saw the same potential.

“He was a typical Budge-Vines-Kramer-Gonzalez-California

player,” Kramer said.

This meant he had powerful ground strokes, a dominating flat serve and a kick (twist) serve that pulled players out of position, allowing him to take the net and put away most volleys.

Another player who reportedly had no doubt about Carrothers’ skills was Ted Schroeder. Two years after Carrothers’ death, Schroeder won the U.S. national men’s tennis championship at Forest Hills.

On his return to California, according to Press and Kinne, the champion went to Coronado, the island city in San Diego’s harbor.

Kinne said Schroeder “took the trophy to Bob’s father, and said, ‘I want you to have this, because if Bob had lived, I would never have won it.’”

In 1993, Schroeder described his fondness for Carrothers and his family. The two young men spent entire summers together, he wrote for *Coronado: We Remember*, a local history. Of his friend’s death, he said: “The pain hasn’t gone away in 53 years.”

Newspaperman Kinne, who died at 93 in early August, said last year that he saw both Carrothers and Pancho Gonzalez play as 18-year-olds. He ranked Gonzalez as physically stronger but said Carrothers possessed “a better all-around game.”

There is no way of predicting what the fu-

A condensed version of this story appeared in *The New York Times* March 22, 2009.



HONORS: Sixty-nine young men and women, including the 1941 honoree, Arlene Pratt, left, and her 2009 counterpart, Sharon Reibstein, have won Robert Carrothers Sportsmanship Award.

After His Death, Carrothers' Rivals Dominated Tennis as Top Stars

ture held for Carrothers. World War II was looming, soon engulfing young men he knew as competitors and comrades, according to Arthur Marx, 86, a top junior in the 1940s (he scored a victory over Jack Kramer at the 1939 Ojai tournament).

Douglas Woodbury, Carrothers' favorite doubles partner and a pallbearer at his funeral, died in a military plane crash in World War II. Ted Olewine, a junior Davis Cup teammate, served in the South Pacific and died of disease.

Marx roomed with Carrothers during a series of Canadian tournaments in 1939. Carrothers, he said, "had the greatest future, in my opinion, of any tennis player in that picture."

Marx said he keeps a photo in his den in Bel Air, Calif., showing the 1939 Southern California Junior Davis Cup team. In it, Carrothers stands in a line of nine young players (including Marx) beside the Cup: Three became Wimbledon champions (Kramer, Schroeder, and Patty), one a French Champion (Patty) and two United States champions (Kramer and Schroeder).

"They were a great group," said Marx, who later worked in the entertainment industry, using skills learned from his father, Groucho.

Because of his prominence and promise, Carrothers' death shocked the tennis world in a profound way. In November, 1940, a month after Carrothers's death, Ned Wheldon, a senior writer for *American Lawn Tennis* magazine, wrote:

"I can sum it all up in one sentence: In nearly 20 years of tennis I have never met anyone who so nearly approached the ideal player: in skill, rhythm and physique, in courtesy, appearance, and modesty."

Wheldon concluded: "In courage, sportsmanship and character I have never met his equal. There is no one who could have done more for the game by becoming its champion."

Today, few signs remain of Carrothers's prowess or presence. His grave bears only a plate with his name and the years of his life.



MATES: The 1939 Southern California Junior Davis Cup team at Los Angeles Tennis Club. From left, Arthur Marx, Dave Freeman, Douglas Woodbury, Jack Kramer, Welby Van Horn, Ted Olewine, Bob Carrothers, Ted Schroeder, Budge Patty.

His trophies have vanished from his high school gymnasium, according to Pike Meade, a retired coach and teacher. Among the missing hardware: Schroeder's 1942 Forest Hills trophy. There is no formal record of his gift of it to the Carrothers

family, according to Jennifer Pitzen of San Jose, Calif., who assisted Schroeder until his death in 2006.

"It is not out of Ted's character to have done it," she said, noting that the 1942 trophy is not among the 39 trophies Schroeder donated to the International Tennis Hall of Fame before his death.

The six-member San Diego Hall of Fame committee faced a difficult choice: Reject a promising young player who did not fulfill his expected destiny or elevate a tennis prodigy to an elite circle of the sport's best players. In late March, 69 years after his death, they elected Carrothers to the hall, honoring his skills as a player and his legacy of good sportsmanship.

Finally, in late August, dozens of Carrothers' Award winners and relatives assembled in San Diego for an induction ceremony.

Standing together on a stadium court in his honor, they heard a poem read aloud that appeared in *Western Tennis* in 1940 to eulogize the fallen Carrothers:

There is no death! The stars go down
To rise upon some other shore,
And bright in heaven's jeweled crown
They shine forevermore.

There is no death! The forest leaves
Convert to life the viewless air;
The rocks disorganize to feed
The hungry moss they bear.

There is no death! the dust we tread
Shall change beneath the summer showers,
To golden grain, or mellow fruit,
Or rainbow-tinted flowers.

And ever near us though unseen,
The dear immortal spirits tread,
For all the boundless universe
Is life -- There is no dead!



In Its 70th Year, Sportsmanship Award Winners Gather to Honor Bob Carrothers



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- 1 John Martin
- 2 Larry Belinsky (1972)
- 3 Ben Press (1942)
- 4 Tatche Kanther Rudee (1983)
- 5 Mary Struthers (1968)
- 6 Libby Weiss Helms (1963)
- 7 Pauline Stamatopoulos Theodore (1953)
- 8 Jean Doyle Garrett (1945)
- 9 Jeanine Pierce Steber (1958)
- 10 Molly Danielson (1961)
- 11 Brannaca Elsberry (1990)
- 12 Lucy Kable Borsenberger (1969)

- Bob Carrothers Bill Carrothers
Sons of Jack Carrothers (1943)
- 13 Doug Bradley (1979)
- 14 Jim Seiler (1944)
- 15 Otis Allmon (1984)
- 16 John Bennett (1971)
- 17 Anni Bennett Miller
Sister of John Kier Bennett (1962)
- 18 Bill Walcher (1949)

- 19 Del Tulao (1974)
- 20 Kerry Safdie (1988)
- 21 Katrina Crawford Failla (1986)
- 22 Sharon Reibstein (2009)
- 23 Kevin Klabunde (1986)
- 24 Allan Jurilina (1993)
- 25 Erick Baer (1964)
- 26 Michelle Morris (1994)
- 27 Jamie Saben (1992)
- 28 Paul Press (1975)
- 29 Ulysses Marquez (1997)
- 30 Bill Jack (1956)
- 31 Hale Maher (1976)

Photos:
Gerry Rosario
August 29, 2009