

Tony Gilbert – Founder of Pennant Hills Park Tennis Centre

Tony Gilbert was a doer. His hand was first up when a job had to be done and it remained up until the job was finished. This, coupled with his skill and enthusiasm for tennis, made him an invaluable asset to ETDTA.

Tony was born in 1928 in the town of Koondrook, a pretty town on the Murray River in rural Victoria, to immigrant parents Ted and Elsie from the UK. Together with his two younger sisters, Tony lived in the small and remote farming township of Sandhill Lake and attended Buderim West, a one teacher Infants/Primary school, before boarding with a family in Kerang (30 km away) to attend High School. Tony's family were forced to leave Sandhill Lake when he was 15, due to 9 years of drought and not being unable sustain an income. They started their new city life at North Bondi in 1942. The house was a 5 minute walk from Bondi Beach where Tony spent a lot of time learning and mastering the art of body surfing. He attended Cleveland Street High School and after obtaining his Leaving Certificate, gained a Cadetship with the Railways and studied after work to become an Electrical Engineer. He remained with the Railways for his entire working career, rising to the rank of Chief Engineer for the Lighting Section, before taking early retirement at age of 58.

Tony started playing competition tennis with North Eastern (NESTA) after he moved to Sydney. He taught himself to play from reading books and watching others and went on to play top grade tennis in Sydney, for Eastern Suburbs and Eastwood Thornleigh, and won many open doubles and mixed titles in country tournaments around NSW. It was at one of these tournaments, at Armidale in 1951, that he met Tamworth girl Meg Wilson.



**Tony and Meg at the Armidale
Tennis Tournament**

Meg and Tony married in Tamworth in 1957 and lived at Randwick for 3 years before moving to Boronia Avenue Epping in 1960 when their first child (John) was 5 months old - Robert, Michael and Kim followed soon after at 18 month intervals. Soon after moving to Epping, Frank (Fonce) Stewart, who was the Midson Road Courts Caretaker/Coach and in charge of Umpires at White City for the NSW and Australian Tennis Championships, spotted Meg in the front garden when riding his pushbike to the Midson Road courts. Fonce knew Meg from her days playing at White City in the NSW Schoolgirls and State titles, and after determining her husband was also a Tennis Player, spread the word of their arrival. That afternoon, Tom Ridgeway (A1 Tennis Player for Frenesi and Solicitor for ETDTA for many years) invited Tony to play Saturday afternoon Tennis for Frenesi – Meg joined the team a few weeks later. Tony and Meg played for Frenesi for the next 20 years with the same team members, who became a close group of friends, over that period.



The Gilbert Family at the West Tamworth Easter Tennis Tournament – the photo and related story were published in Northern Daily Leader in recognition of Tony and Meg competing for 15 consecutive years.

Tony won the ETDTA Open Singles Title at the age of 40 - Meg and son Robert also won the ETDTA Open singles title to claim a rare family trifecta. Tony also represented ETDTA for many years in inter-district competition, competing in Blackwell Cup and winning the Harold Twyford Jones Cup with other long time ETDTA competitors including his good mate and longtime doubles partner Bert Deed and Frenesi teammate Col Christophers.

After 16 years at Boronia Avenue the lure of a house with a tennis court was great and Tony and Meg were fortunate enough to acquire Boonderoo at Gloucester Road Epping. The Frenesi Group changed courts and team name to Boonderoo and continued playing A Grade tennis for several more years before most transitioned to Lawn Bowls.

Although a handy player and a friendly and familiar face on ETDTA tennis courts for over 35 years, it's for his off court achievements that Tony is best remembered.

Having met Fonce and been introduced to ETDTA, both Meg and Tony were drafted onto the Council of Management where one of the major tasks was the redrafting of the Constitution that had last been updated in 1957. Tony went on to become President of ETDTA from 1971 to 1974 and during this time began a passionate pursuit of acquiring more tennis courts for an under resourced ETDTA. During the latter part of the 1960's the loss of private courts (for building blocks) began to accelerate, making it imperative that ETDTA acquire more public courts to augment the three courts at the Wyralla Ave/Midson Rd centre. These were the only public courts for an association with an ever increasing number of people wishing to play competition and social tennis.

For many years attempts were made to obtain suitable land for the building of tennis courts in the Ryde, Parramatta and Hornsby Council areas which included Mobbs Lane Reserve, Santa Rosa, and 265 Midson Road Beecroft. However, late in 1972 ETDTA became aware of the Pennant Hills Park Sporting Complex which was in its early stages of development by Hornsby Shire Council. This was seen as a great opportunity and ETDTA focused its efforts on acquiring a large Tennis complex in this beautiful bushland setting. There were many ETDTA members, too numerous to name, who were directly and indirectly involved in the ensuing negotiations, planning and development/acquisition of the Pennant Hills Park complex (stages 1 (8 courts), and stages 2 & 3 (additional 8 courts). Tony was the Chief Negotiator, Designer and Estimator for the Project, as he was for the proposed complexes at Mobbs Lane Reserve, Santa Rosa Park and 265 Midson Road. These did not eventuate due to residents opposing the proposals and ETDTA deciding to pursue Pennant Hills Park as the superior option.

Tony found the pressure of work associated with the completion of the complex did not permit him to continue as President. John Eyles became President in 1974 and adeptly oversaw the greatest period of growth in ETDTA's history and presided over the opening of the new Pennant Hills Park complex.

Tony was awarded Life Membership of ETDTA and continued with voluntary service until hanging up his racquet in the early 1990's when he joined Cheltenham Recreation Club to play Lawn Bowls. Tony went on to win the Cheltenham Club singles title in 1993, but once again is best remembered for the tireless voluntary work he performed for the club. During his time with Cheltenham he became the Greens Manager and performed unpaid electrical and building maintenance work on a regular basis. He was also made a Life Member of Cheltenham Recreation Club, which culminated in him receiving a Certificate of Recognition from the NSW Governor for all his voluntary work in 2001 – the international year of the volunteer.



Dedication of the Tony Gilbert Stand by MLA Andrew Tink with ETDTA President Eugene Gum (centre), Tony on right.

Tony passed away on the 12th of November 2010 after enduring a battle with Parkinson's Disease. The Stand for the Main Court at the Pennant Hills Tennis Complex was named after Tony in recognition of his work – the plaque from the defunct stand is now mounted on the Main Clubhouse wall.