

Canada's one-time top-ranked tennis champ actively follows today's game



By Jeff Doner

From the late 1940s and into the early 50s, Brendan Macken was Canada's top ranked male tennis player.

He won the Canadian Open men's singles title in 1950, doubles titles in 1946 and 1951 and during his prime was a Davis Cup team member from 1946 ? 1952 and again in 1954.

In the midst of the prestigious Wimbledon tennis tournament, Macken ? now a resident of Aurora in his 91st year ? still keeps a close eye on what's going on in the tennis world.

With Wimbledon matches playing on TV in the background, Macken began our chat with an assessment of the bright young Canadian tennis talent that is starting to gain notoriety.

?I saw Raonic and he played quite well, but his competition wasn't as tough as Vasek Pospisil had today, but Raonic's serve wins matches for him ? he's powerful there, but on the defense he's got a lot of work to do yet. He's got to serve well enough that he won't lose the serve and he did that in today's match. But he certainly has a future.?

Macken quickly went in to how the game has changed since his glory days.

?It's different today, like golf. They're not playing with a wooden club like we were. In tennis, they're now able to get a pretty good spin on a ball, so you get some players that spin it quite well ? Nadal is one of them and so is Federer. They'll hit the ball and you think it is going out and then it curves and stays in the court. It's very difficult to say today the difference between today's athletes with the older ones.?

However, he was of strong opinion that the greatest tennis player that ever lived is Aussie tennis legend Rod Laver.

?I wonder what he would have done with the equipment that we have today. He played on every surface.?

Laver, a left-handed power player, had a career that spanned 23 years that included 184 singles titles as an amateur and a pro and was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1981.

Macken said he is one of the only players who have won Wimbledon and the Australian, US and French opens and do it all again four years later.

But Macken also recognizes that the game isn't the only thing that has changed ? the industry as a whole has.

?I didn't get the \$300,000 that they get today; this is what I got when I won the Canadian Open. This was my victory,? he said holding an unused fishing pole. ?And no reel on it,? he laughed.

The fishing pole, although a nice one, has never been used as he has ?never been much of a fisherman.?

?When I was playing, there wasn't any money in it, because it wasn't professionalized yet, and I played Wimbledon once, but on top of that the war was taking place and it killed Davis Cup matches back then,? he said, noting the first year he played was 1946 after the war ended at the age of 23.

Born in Montreal, Macken and his younger brother Jim worked on their game together. Macken said during summer vacation the other kids went to camp in the summer, while they mostly stayed home, leaving them with little to do in the summer days.

?We had some old racquets in a closet and my brother and I would go down to the public courts at the end of the street, we'd open them at 8 a.m., run back up the street for a sandwich, then back down and get kicked off at 4,? he said.

By the time the Second World War broke out, Macken was taken out of service as he contracted scarlet and rheumatic fever that paralyzed him from the waist down for six months. This also led to complications with a heart murmur.

?I know people would see me and think, ?what's he doing here walking around when he should be overseas?"?

His brother Jim ? who did serve in the war ? was no slouch with a tennis racquet himself. Like his older brother, he was a Canadian champion and the two even won a doubles title together in 1946.

After his health issues cleared up, he went right back to training and playing tournaments. It was during a tournament at the Toronto Tennis Club that two American tennis players would approach him and give him some advice that would change his life in many ways.

Former US tennis player Scott Davis suggested he head down to William & Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia to pursue both his scholastic and tennis goals.

?I played well against them and next thing I know I got a call from the admissions office. So I ended up going there.?

Training 75 minutes per day on a rigorous schedule, it didn't take long for the chemistry major to start succeeding at William & Mary.

?They had a very good tennis team,? he recalled. ?That team won the NCAA tennis champs twice in 1947 and 1948,? he said, showing his championship ring from the wins. ?I got better and better and better. I couldn't get them to train the same way up here.?

Follow the rest of Macken's journey in the tennis world in next week's edition of The Auroran.