



## **Tri-County Women's Tennis Association**

### **A Brief History**

In the spring of 1988, a small group of women got together with the idea of forming an association that would create and manage an amateur women's tennis league. By June of that year, there were eight clubs ready to commit teams and form a league. The clubs that founded what became the Tri-County Women's Tennis Association were Falkenburg Tennis Club (now Buttonwood Athletic Club), Harbour Ridge Country Club, Indian River Plantation, Lawnwood Tennis Club, Mariner Sands Country Club, Martin Downs Country Club, North River Shores Tennis Club, and the Reserve (now Legacy Golf and Tennis Club).

By their late June meeting, the group had a president, JoAnn Barone of Falkenburg. They had \$270 in the bank, had set the association dues at \$50 per team and already had established A, B, and C levels for teams. Since there was no past president to chair a nominating committee, Barone asked Diane Stratman of Falkenburg to be her vice president, Helen Williams of Martin Downs to be secretary and Barbara Tartaglia of NRS to be treasurer. Until bylaws could be drawn up and approved, the group agreed to use the bylaws of the Palm Beach Women's Tennis Association.

A seven-person committee worked up the playing schedule for that first season. Playing were teams from 10 clubs: IRP, the Reserve, Martin Downs, NRS, Falkenburg, Lawnwood, Harbour Ridge, Mariner Sands, Rivers Edge, a Jupiter club, and Pahokee, a club in western Palm Beach County. The first awards luncheon was held at Harbour Ridge the following April and on May 1, 1989 newly elected officers took office. The first elected executive committee was composed of Diane Stratman of Falkenburg, president; Lindi Rinaldi of Harbour Ridge, vice president; Marilyn Frederick of IRP, secretary; Wilma Masters of the Reserve, treasurer; and Maureen Krosin of Martin Downs, roster chairman.

The early years of Tri-County were spent recruiting teams and developing and defining the rules of the association and the rules of play. Women had permanent doubles partnerships that could change only at mid-season. The rosters consisted of first six, then 10 women. Names could be added to the rosters but there was a waiting period of two weeks before a new player could play. Rules clearly defined who an amateur was. From match to match an individual could move only two court positions in either direction.

The earliest divisions of play were A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. All teams fielded five courts of doubles and teams that finished in first place in their division were automatically moved to the next higher division for the next season of play; this later became optional. A new team applying to enter a division played qualifying rounds to determine in which division it would be placed.

By 1990, the league was already wrestling with the problem of ensuring fairness in competition for all teams at all levels. A vote to have players rated by the USTA/ NTRP system failed, but questions about the desirability of using a ratings system of some kind began to arise periodically.

By 1991, there were 37 teams playing, a record 8 teams out of Lawnwood alone. Division A had 8 teams, B1 had 10 teams, B2 had 12 and C had 7 teams. New clubs joined the league, like Meadowood (now Panther Woods Country Club) in 1992 and old clubs like Pahokee departed. Due to the heavy demand for team space, the B2 division, with 15 teams, was divided into two sections twice in the early '90's. As time went on, the league found that requiring new teams to play qualifying rounds proved to be too cumbersome and time consuming. It was dropped as a prerequisite of division placement. The scoring system changed several times in an attempt to create a more equitable system of play.

A major step was taken in 1995 when a special ratings committee was formed to study the issue of ratings and play policies. Chairing the committee was Judy McDonald and members were Nancy Deiters, Shirley Losch, Carol Maloch, Mary Jane Oechsle, Joanne Harper, Donna Bradshaw and Nancy Jones. The committee made a number of recommendations that were adopted including a requirement that each player hold a current USTA rating or acquire a USTA-NTRP rating and that at least half of a team's regular roster would consist of players rated for that level.

This was a major change for the Tri-County league. One result of the requirement to be USTA-rated was that a number of players received 4.5 ratings, but not enough from each club to support inter-club league matches. Some teams found it did not have sufficient players rated at their level to field a team. Many players felt there was a wide disparity across the board in the ratings verified by USTA-sanctioned verifiers, causing players to question the effectiveness of the on-court rating system itself. Other issues arose, such as a reluctance of some players/teams to play hard courts, or dismay that teaching pros could play in an amateur league. The 1995-96 season opened with four fewer teams and 197 fewer players than in the previous season.

In January 1996 the Board agreed to try the NTRP rating system for two more years while the association looked for a computer program

that could perform the ratings function through match play results. A program was found and purchased and the Board agreed that 1996-97 would be a transition year while match results were entered into the program and analyzed.

The Club Tennis Rating Program (CTRP) was not exactly a rating program, but more of a ranking program. Through match results, players were awarded points that placed them in different groups with certain outcomes that players could expect by the end of the season. For instance, one such outcome was that the top 10% of players who played one-half plus two of their division matches, played first court only and won 90% or more of their matches would be required to move up one division level. Players were awarded points for winning matches and for each set they won according to the court position they played.

By the start of the 1997-98 season, TCWTA was depending on the CTRP software and had eliminated the requirement for players to be USTA-NTRP-rated. Existing players were considered to be at the level of the division in which they were playing; new players were rated by their pros; and it was expected that the CTRP would guide player placement once match play began.

However, the CTRP did not bring to the league the smooth operation it had expected, in part because it was primarily a ranking system, and association rules already allowed for other criteria to enter into the ranking process. For example, teams still had higher ranked players playing down if they had no team at the higher division level. The two-position movement rule from match to match was still in effect. New players still had to wait two weeks to be verified before they could play. And different rules applied to those players who were labeled 'subs'.

Another 'think tank' committee of members was appointed and held extended meetings to determine what should be done. The result was a special board meeting in June of 1998 to consider a proposal that the association return to the requirement that all players would have to be USTA or USTA-NTRP rated. The motion passed, with eight clubs in favor and six opposed, but the long trial of dealing with what had become difficult and seemingly insurmountable problems resulted in a number of players and teams resigning from Tri-County and forming a separate league for soft court play only.

The departure of those teams prompted Tri-County to simplify much of what had grown too complex and unwieldy. In the following season, the league reduced the number of playing courts to three in all divisions, eliminated the distinction of 'subs' as apart from regulars and subject to different rules, and totally eliminated playing below one's rating. The leadership committed the league to a continuing

rating system of some kind in order to assure players of fair and equitable competition. It also reaffirmed its long-time practice of offering league participation to all clubs, whether public or private, and to league play on all court surfaces.

By the 2000-01 season Tri-County had 22 teams in three divisions and many of the clubs that left the league in 1998 had returned. New teams joined. Population growth throughout the area benefited the league and membership growth was rapid over the following five years increasing the league's base from 23 teams to 34 and attracting hundreds of new players.

In 2002 when the USTA discontinued its on-court rating system, Tri-County contracted with a former USTA-certified ratings verifier, Don Pritchett, to continue verifying ratings for all its players. At the same time, the association, assisted by Pritchett, began looking for a software program that could provide match-based analysis of player results and in 2005, found such a program. Developed in conjunction with the USTA NorCal, the Dynamic Computer Tennis Rating Program (DCTR), provided every player with a dynamic rating that could change with every match played. The USTA made the program available to Tri-County on a pilot basis. It worked, and there was universal satisfaction with the DCTR among teams and players.

The league also still hoped to acquire league management software, which would allow for online standings, news and announcements, player rankings, scheduling and more. Linda Crane, president in 2004-06, found Topdog Sports, a company with 12 years experience in designing and implementing software programs for tennis. Its Leagues for Fun program, designed to manage amateur league play, was piloted by Tri-County in 2005 and formally adopted as its management program in 2006. In addition to being able to incorporate the DCTR into its program and to schedule and record standings, Leagues for Fun offered a great deal of valuable scouting and reporting information for team captains, a complete record of all matches played and the rise and fall of individual player ratings and doubles team ratings. Leagues for Fun could arrange tournaments and provide a player ladder system, valuable features that TCWTA believed it could use in the future.

The 2006-07 season found the Association in good health with more than 450 players rostered on 34 teams playing out of 17 different clubs. The 3.5 division included 16 teams and had grown to the point that it was divided into two sections for the first time in more than 15 years. The 3.0 division was filled to capacity, and growth for the 4.0 division looked promising. Having finally resolved many of its past issues, TCWTA found itself looking to the future with great optimism.