

A Champion By Rick Reil

In the spring of 1967, I discovered that a champion doesn't have to be a super athlete. At the time I was a ninth grader at Chief Joseph Junior High in Richland, Washington. Junior highs were common at that time and normally spanned seventh to ninth grade. I had recently discovered the joy of playing tennis, thanks to my friend Linda Hoffman. Linda happened to be one of the prettiest and sweetest girls in my class, she was also an excellent tennis player. Our school didn't have any tennis courts so we would walk the mile and a half to play on the courts at Howard Amon Park.

Wrestling season was over, and I had worked hard to excel and was in excellent physical condition. I purchased a T.A. Davis Hi-Point tennis racquet with money earned doing odd jobs for my dad's weed spraying business. It was a decent racquet, not the top of the line Davis Imperial, but not too bad, especially for a beginner. It turned out that with my natural abilities and Linda's help I was able to make the team.

Our coach was Mr. Holland St. John, Chief Joe's speech teacher. Mr. St. John was the best teacher in our school. For that matter he was the best teacher I ever had. He was a great tennis player, coach, and an excellent example in many other ways to the kids he taught and coached.

There were many of the school's popular kids on the team and also some of the kids that were not considered part of the "In Crowd." My good friend John Yesberger was a skinny, short kid who wore glasses. He was smarter than the average kid and not worried much about his social position. Several things set John apart from the rest of the team members. One was his family. John had parents that would have put Ward and June Cleaver to shame. His older brother and younger sister were kind and caring kids, mature beyond their years. It was always fun to visit the Yesberger's home. John's parents were gracious and caring to their kid's friends. You always felt welcome in their neat and tidy home.

Some, if they didn't know John, would have considered him a nerd. If you knew him, nothing would have been further from the truth. Though he was probably the smallest kid on the team, he was also Chief Joe's tennis team's secret weapon...he was our best player. John had perseverance; he had the whole package. He could easily beat any of the stronger, bigger guys, that were the jocks on the football and basketball teams but paled in comparison to him on the tennis court. He was smarter and skilled enough to outthink them. Tennis is a lot about strategy and John was the master strategist.

I wasn't too bad a player and was good enough to get to play exposition matches, which meant I wasn't good enough for varsity but good enough to get to go on the bus to matches with other schools. One bright and beautiful spring afternoon we had a match with Garrison Jr. High's team from Walla Walla. The courts were full and most of our players were doing well. Linda won her match and my doubles partner and I won ours. I looked over and saw that Coach St. John and all the other players who had finished their matches were gathered around one of the courts. I hurried over to see what was going on.

Our best player, undefeated John Yesberger was losing. In Junior High we played three sets, you had to win two sets to win the match. John had lost the first set and was one point away from losing the second set and the match. The spectators were deathly quiet. It was John's serve and he aced it. He had nerves of steel. He moved with speed and purpose that day, he finished that game without giving up another point. The rest of us team members couldn't believe it. None of use could have accomplished what John had just done. I'd never seen such a determined 14-year old in my life. The next game was 40-love and John was serving. The serve was to the Ad Court and the Garrison player's backhand. John hit the ball so hard that the poor kid didn't even see it coming. John won the game, set and match and Chief Joseph Junior High School won the team match.

I haven't seen John since I graduated from Columbia High School in 1970. He was always a friend and a winner in my mind. My old tennis racquet hangs on the wall in my office. When I look at it, I sometimes think of John. I hope his perseverance has served him well these last 51 years.

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