



The highly ranked mixed doubles pair of Eva Welsher and Scott Moore toeing the kitchen line.

SENIOR PLAYERS *Excel and Inspire!*

Pickleball's legacy began with senior players, many who have played and are currently on the pro circuit collecting dozens of gold, silver and bronze medals in tournaments across the country and around the globe.

By **Drew Wathey**

Like so many senior players who bask in the glow of the ever-brightening spotlight of pickleball, Eva Welsher's ascension in the sport began with a childhood love of tennis. Once ranked as one of the top juniors in the country, the 57-year-old mother of two grown sons earned a scholarship to Northwestern, the Wildcats boasting one of college's elite programs.

"As a junior tennis player, I traveled the country from 12 years old on. In those days, I would travel

with my doubles partner and got housing at each tournament, which would never happen these days. I was heavily recruited and offered a tennis scholarship to Northwestern and we won Big Ten titles and were consistently one of the top collegiate teams in the country," recalled Welsher, who was born and raised in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan.

A torn rotator cuff in college ended a promising tennis career but didn't deter Welsher from eventually excelling again on a court, this time

pickleball. "When I found pickleball, I felt like I had a do-over and could pursue pickleball on my terms," she said. "I would own the process, the journey and the results. I just got tunnel vision and decided I wanted to be the best I could be."

To be the best at anything necessitates patience, drive and determination—qualities that are firmly in place and clearly separate Welsher from many other competitors.

"Pickleball literally fell in my lap. It was an unexpected but welcome

gift from my friend Susie Mascarin Keane,” she explained. “We grew up playing junior tennis together and later competitive platform tennis. She knew I was becoming an empty nester. Two weeks after my son left home, she gave me a demo paddle, signed us up for a tournament at the 4.5 level and said to me, ‘You have two months to become a 4.5 and play the tournament.’ We played. I was horrible, but we won. And that was the start of my pickleball addiction.”

To attain the status of a nationally ranked player in any sport, highly competitive juices flow easily and often. Such was the case with Welsher as she transitioned into the sport of pickleball and is now considered one of the top doubles players in the world. But, while accolades came early for her in tennis, such was not the case for her segue into pickleball.

“It was difficult yet exhilarating at the same time. I loved the fact that I wasn’t very good at it right away so it would be a challenge,” remembers Welsher. “I love problem solving so it was perfect as it opened a whole new world to me where I met such wonderful people. I was getting killed by everybody no matter if they were big, small, old or young. I loved it. A new chapter opened in my life right when I needed it the most and took my mind off of not having my boys at home anymore.”

As an acclaimed athlete early on in her life, Welsher knew full well and appreciated the importance of a good physical regimen to keep her on the top of her game. And perhaps no other pickleball peer rivals her in fitness and conditioning.

“Well, I’m a little crazy about training,” she admitted. “Every year I add to it, and being in Florida now and living adjacent to the Naples Pickleball Center I am training a ton. Drilling is my happy place where I can solve all my problems and break

everything down. I drill at least three times a week with a partner as well as work on my ball machine several days a week.

“I play games three times a week as well, always with different people to see variety. Off the court, I work out with a trainer three times a week with weights and one time a week for endurance. Then at night I like to study video. I know it’s a lot, but Father Time is ticking, and I want no regrets this time around. Winning is wonderful, but it’s the journey that excites me. If I do my job, then results should follow, but I’m good no matter what happens.”

What has happened for Welsher is a second chance at top competition in a sport she is fervently passionate about. And, to garner the success she desires, her mixed doubles partner is arguably the sport’s most decorated athlete. Scott Moore, holder of nearly 150 titles over the past nine years—more than any other professional pickleballer—is now playing alongside Welsher and is perhaps her biggest fan.

“She complements my game in numerous ways, including being so much fun and such a fierce competitor that she makes me want to work harder and work specifically on becoming a better mixed doubles partner for her,” said Moore, who owns Triple Crown wins in six major championships, a record that may never be matched.

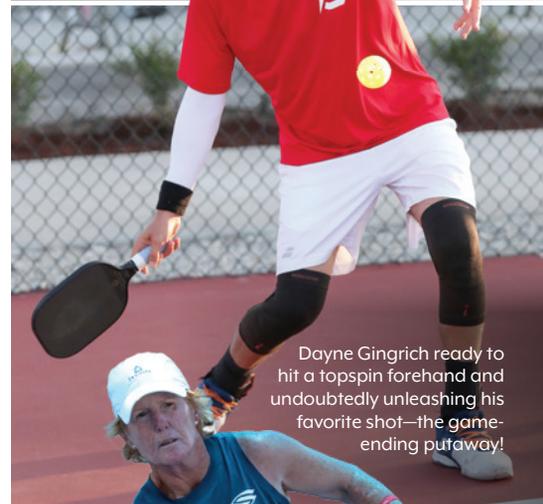
“She is super encouraging to me, even when I mess up; fires me up with a fierce growl when we win a tough point; and is willing to play whatever role she needs to play for us to win. I just always feel like we have each other’s backs, and are both warriors, and she has become my favorite mixed partner of all time.”

The feeling is mutual as Welsher credits Moore with her continual growth and success as a player. The

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The unrelenting focus off the forehand side from Beth Bellamy.



Dayne Gingrich ready to hit a topspin forehand and undoubtedly unleashing his favorite shot—the game-ending putaway!



Many of the game’s best players, like Cammy MacGregor, started their careers on the tennis court. Once ranked as high as 75th in the world in women’s singles, she also had a world doubles ranking of 38th in 1992.



Scott Crandall just started playing pickleball in 2019 and is now regarded as one of the sport’s top senior pro men’s doubles players.



Dave "Badger" Weinbach, one of the sport's all-time greats, with an off-the-court defensive lob.



Indianapolis native, and two-time All-American and former #1 ranked doubles player for the Crimson Tide of Alabama, Rick Witsken displays his talents on the court.



A former U.S. Navy fighter pilot, Paul Olin is no doubt well-equipped to handle any and all high-stress situations on the pickleball court.



With 30+ years as a pickleball instructor, John Sperling shows his students how it's done.

duo recently won gold at the Delray Beach APP Senior Mixed Doubles event. "The ICON Scott has helped me with mental toughness, strategy and overall performance. He gave me the confidence to excel. He just gets me, my intensity, my reactions and just lets me be me, which allows me to play freely. Scott works so hard to continuously improve as I do and is open to change and strategizing so we are both on the same page," said Welsher.

That same page is a lofty one and echoed by Moore: "Our goal for 2022 is to be the No. 1 senior mixed doubles team in the world." The 60-year-old resident of Colorado Springs added, "Since we began playing together, Eva has gained an incredible amount of confidence, has learned to be very strategic, and now has a full arsenal of shots and makes better choices with her shots. But more than anything, she now knows she belongs."

Another young tennis prodigy was Cammy MacGregor, 53, who also made the move to pickleball and currently teaches both sports at the world-renowned La Costa Resort in Carlsbad, California.

"I grew up in Palos Verdes, California, and started playing tennis at the age of 7 at the Jack Kramer Tennis Club. So many top players came out of that club it was crazy," she noted. "Tracy Austin, Eliot Teltscher, Pete Sampras, Lindsay Davenport and many others. I was a top-ranked junior and then, during my senior year in high school, I decided to turn pro. I played 10 years on the tour. I had a high singles ranking of 75th, and 38th in doubles."

At the 1989 Australian Open, MacGregor reached the fourth round in singles, and a year later at the same major event, reached the quarterfinals in doubles with her sister Cinny. But it is now the sport

of pickleball that has captivated MacGregor and keeps her excited about the future.

"What initially attracted me to pickleball was how totally different it was from tennis: all these funny rules, playing with a wiffle ball, and the scoring," she recalled. "The strategy part was very intriguing to me, kind of like a chess match. Also, I was so attracted to how social pickleball is. You can get four pickleball courts on one tennis court, and have 16 people playing, laughing and having fun. All ages and abilities can play pickleball. How great is that!"

So much talk is now centered on pickleball becoming an Olympic sport and with so many nations coming on board, MacGregor feels it's only a matter of time before pickleball athletes will be marching in for their respective countries during the Opening Ceremonies: "Three or four years ago, when someone mentioned if pickleball will be in the Olympics, I thought, 'No way.' Now, in 2028 pickleball will be an exhibition sport at the Summer Games in Los Angeles. On the professional side, we have two pro tours that are being heavily invested in and the prize money is increasing steadily. With these changes and the increase in popularity by 40% since 2020, I believe the sky is the limit."

While pickleball continues to grow at a meteoric rate around the globe, and professional leagues and tournaments are played almost every weekend throughout the year, it is still the amateur players (with a good majority being seniors) who are the backbone of the sport and providing a major influx of new players. Phil Dunmeyer, 79, of San Clemente, California, says there are a few important aspects as to why seniors love the sport of pickleball.

“Social interaction, a good physical workout, and the easiest sport/activity for seniors to learn all underline the key reasons for pickleball’s popularity,” he explained. “The real rise in the game’s interest, however, can be attributed to the millions of 3.0 and 3.5 players who have been the true ambassadors of pickleball and brought so many of their friends and neighbors to our pickleball courts and introduced them to the sport. And, we all know, one time on a pickleball court—with a paddle in your hand and friends next to you and across the net—is all it takes!”

Diane Keller, 79, of Burnt Hills, New York, agrees: “I used to play in competitive tennis tournaments and leagues, but found my ability was declining. I wasn’t as fast or strong as I once was. In pickleball, I was as good as I ever was and had the prospect of getting better. It was exciting—like a fresh start.”

And, with many new players being attracted to the sport, the quality of play has increased across the board. “More and more people play now, and the level of play has risen dramatically,” said Keller. “Players are hitting the ball harder and using a greater variety of strokes. The number of tournaments has increased dramatically, and most people have now heard of pickleball.”

Alice Tym was once ranked 13th in the world in women’s singles in tennis and played in all four of the sport’s Grand Slam events. A member of the Intercollegiate Hall of Fame, she played #1 for the Florida Gators all four years of her time in Gainesville. Her tennis excellence extended into the coaching ranks as well. A USPTA Coach of the Year, her University of Tennessee-Chattanooga teams won three consecutive national championships while she also captured two Ivy

League championships as coach of Yale.

Tym, who is 79 years of age and lives in McDonald, Tennessee, feels that pickleball will continually resonate with senior players. “Pickleball will always attract seniors. It is great fun. Most of the time, it is the seniors who get the courts built and do much of the start-up work. There is plenty of room for both younger and older players in the sport if managed properly,” said Tym, a “Gator Great” as a member of the University of Florida Athletic Hall of Fame.

The world is certainly taking notice of the rapid rise in participation and popularity of the sport of pickleball, and those who forged its growth—the senior players—encompass a broad spectrum on courts throughout the United States and beyond. They will always be a vital sector of the sport’s demographics. •



Brown University Hall of Fame member Mircea Morariu and his partner, Julie Johnson, are always a formidable pair on the court, especially from the baseline.



Triple Crown winner Jennifer Dawson fixes her steady gaze on a return.

With nearly 30 years of tennis head coaching experience—first at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California, and now at UC Riverside—Mattias Johansson was inducted into the Vanguard Hall of Fame as a player and a coach, and is also a member of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) Hall of Fame.

PHOTO BY STEVE TAYLOR