

“HOOKED”

The Story of Early Birds at OPRC

Who's to say? No one can remember for sure. Jake Hannas joined the staff at Overland Park Racquet Club in 1982 and it was already in its second or third year he thinks. Bill Guilfoil, the legendary icon who was the Club's "Man of the Year" in 2015 and is well known about town for participating in the Table Tennis competition at the recent Olympic Games (at the tender age of 90), claims to have launched it sometime in the late '70's shortly after the Club opened for business. He somehow managed to persuade a few members to congregate at the crack of dawn (6 am) and get in two or three sets before work ...three times a week, no less. Old Timers like John Cain and John Hanna can remember a time when the players congregated in the lobby and drew from a deck of cards to determine court assignments. The four who drew the aces played on court 1, the deuces on court 2, trays on 3, and so on. Bill Sparks took over its care and feeding sometime in the late eighty's/early ninety's and brought much needed structure, organization and real hands-on management that gave immeasurable impetus to its growth. He developed a ranking system using arcane spread sheet technology and called it "Measured Tennis." By 2009 Bill had relocated to Denver and his short term attempt at absentee management began to take its toll on attendance. By the spring of 2011 a small group of like-minded members formed a steering committee and persuaded the Club to invest in a complete rewrite of the software with an emphasis on the integrity of rankings and court assignment. First shepherd of that "New Era" was Kevin Hammel and then with new management followed shortly by new ownership came the current orchestrator in the persona of Jason Kane.

So although no one can remember for sure the exact moment when OPRC actually gave birth to it, or the sordid details of all its twists and turns, the phenomenon which is known today as the "Early Bird Tour" had its beginnings nearly 40 years ago and has operated in its current format for more than a quarter of a century. During its phenomenal run it has compelled the loyalty of some 550 members (average tenure 8 years) and changed a great many lives in the process.

I have often been asked the question, "If EBT is a never-ending tournament, where no one is ever eliminated and always survives to play in the next round ...then how does anyone ever win?" The answer to that is very simple, yet profound! My good friend Arun Patel enlightened me over 21 years ago ...when we played on the same court in my first Early Bird match and I asked him the same question. He said "Gerry, all you have to do to win big on the Early Bird Tour is show up. Just remember ...it's not the score that counts ...it's the experience!"

People always seem to miss the point ...you don't play on a professionally operated Tour like Early Birds for your health. You hire a trainer for that. Quite the contrary! You play EBT because it's so utterly entertaining, because it's competitive beyond belief, because it's orchestrated by the Club down to the last detail, and because it's available "On Demand." You sign up or sign off "at will" ...honest engine! Not to mention it makes you sleep better, eat better, gets you up off the couch and out of the house. You get an hour and a half of good exercise and still have your whole day left ahead of you (after your nap of course). Not to be overlooked is the fact that you become an integral part of a family, part of a proud, storied tradition ...and, some will say you get to associate with a better class of people (ha)! Oh ...and there's this extraordinary side-benefit: your health improves and you live longer.

In a word ...you become *addicted!*

Your life, in-fact, changes. You no longer schedule appointments on Monday, Wednesday or Friday mornings. Chores are rescheduled like appointments. Instead of taking 2 week vacations, you schedule short getaway trips ...always starting after Earlybirds on Friday morning and returning home Sunday evening in time for Monday morning Tennis. You tell your out-of-town family that they must visit you as you will no longer be traveling

unnecessarily. If holidays happen to fall on Monday or Friday you will only be available for brunch ...not breakfast! If you receive an emergency call that your wife has been rushed to the hospital ... you will find yourself telling them you will be there promptly ...at the conclusion of the third set.

Addiction to EBT presents in many ways as witnessed by the following case studies:

- Roger C ...Refusal to Die Syndrome
 - Roger reported to the Out-patient Clinic for a routine colonoscopy work-up. Early in the procedure Roger experienced a rare and fatal reaction to the anesthetic and flat-lined. Within two weeks Roger was back on court 2 playing EBT. Roger always maintained that the success of the frantic emergency procedure that restored his heartbeat, and saved his life, was driven by his refusal to die before making it back to court one.
- Paul F ...Curious Pretense Syndrome
 - Paul was a consistent Court One player on the Early Bird Tour for the better part of 10 years when he decided to take a job in Florida. He returned often to visit his grown children and their families (and always called from the airport on his departure to reserve his spot in all the rounds of "The Tour" being played during the week or two he was in town). His return visits were so frequent in fact that they became a subject of great curiosity. When commended for his exemplary dedication to his family Paul confessed that it wasn't so much a love for his grandkids as a much needed fix for his Earlybird addiction that accounted for the unusual length and frequency of his visits.
- Mark B ...Cancelled Retirement Syndrome
 - Mark has been one of our most consistent Birds for over a decade ...except for the year when he thought he had licked his addiction. He surprised us one day by admitting that his hard, utterly exhausting work as a food services executive and restaurateur had finally taken its toll. He was selling his house and moving to a warm weather resort to relax and live out his life comfortably in the proverbial lap of luxury. Ah, but before long there was trouble in paradise. Within a year he had abandoned his luxurious lifestyle and given in completely to his yearning for the thrill of super competitive tennis. He didn't just visit frequently like Paul, he cancelled his retirement, moved back and resumed his career on the Early Bird Tour. That was five years ago and he has never, ever, mentioned a Florida resort again.

Although there are literally thousands of stories to be told about those who have played the Early Bird Tour over the last quarter century and during its early incubation period far beyond that, the real story lies in the cause, the motivation, the drive to establish and prolong a final career in your life that may even be more challenging and rewarding than all the previous ones. This may sound a little melodramatic, but the fact remains...

There has never been, a program produced by a local boutique Tennis Club, that has generated this degree of motivation, loyalty and yes, downright addiction, in so many adult members over such an extraordinary period of time, than the phenomenon known simply as the "Early Bird Tour."

by Gerry Stronach

21 Year Career on the Early Bird Tour

Chairman of the Steering Committee that instigated the "New Era" of Early Bird Tennis in 2011

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