

Aztec Tennis Reporter

Founded 1999 SERVING THE SAN DIEGO STATE TENNIS COMMUNITY AUGUST 2021

A SALUTE TO LARRY WILLENS (1938-2021)

Spread across eighty plus years, Lawrence (Larry) Willens lived a remarkable life. He played many roles. He was a skilled coach and motivator for hundreds of collegiate and professional tennis players.

As a team coach, he played a part in the launch and success of a friend's game-changing venture. The friend was Billie Jean King, the venture is World Team Tennis).

Willens was a gifted scholar and teacher of physical education. A former student recalled taking his Physical Education class in Horseback Riding, one of his lifelong passions.

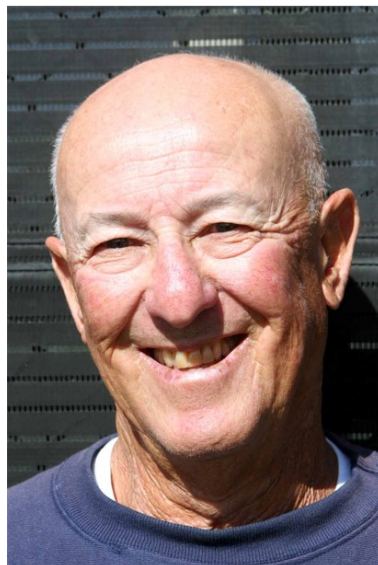
In 2008, he donated a structure that added team lockers and showers which expanded the usefulness of the Aztec Tennis Center. ("Coach Donates \$700,000 Facility," *ATR*, Vol 10, No. 1, January, 2009),

Another year he joined a private fund-raising effort that successfully staged a Davis Cup match in San Diego between Great Britain and the United States. (See Page 8).

And for many more years, he served as a kind of Aztec ambassador to the world of tennis, wearing Aztec tennis caps, shirts and jackets as he coached professional players competing in the four most important international tennis championships: Australia,



Photo Courtesy Larry Belinsky
LARRY WILLENS



Aztec Tennis Reporter photo
SPRING 2010

France, Wimbledon and the United States.

When he passed away after a fall in late July, he was on the verge of beginning his 22nd consecutive year as a volunteer Aztec tennis coach. What were his duties? The Aztec tennis website described them: "He assists the Aztecs at team practices, one-on-one drills, on-court coaching at matches and tournament seeding at the various fall tournaments when San Diego State plays host."

Larry Willens's SDSU assignments began decades earlier under Carol Plunkett, the most successful coach in Aztec tennis history and a resident of the Aztec Athletic Hall of Fame. (See Plunkett's tribute on Page 2).

Aztec Alex Waske is Willens' most talented and successful college player who turned professional. He has no doubts. Larry Willens dramatically changed his life (See Waske's tribute, Page 3).

Editor's note: Over the next seven pages, you are invited to read the comments of ten friends and colleagues who knew Larry Willens in almost every role he played. They are Steve Adamson, Larry Belinsky, Gene Carswell, Lornie Kuhle, Peter Mattera, John Nelson, Carol Plunkett, Ryan Redondo, Abigail Spears, and Alex Waske. The 2010 San Diego Tennis Hall of Fame citation of Willens's many accomplishments appears on Page 5. For a glimpse of how Larry Willens honored his parents, see Page 8.

“He Was Very Passionate About So Many Things in Life”



OBSERVERS: Volunteer Larry Willens, right, and Women’s Coach Mattera.

Peter Mattera: “Larry was a friend of so many in the San Diego tennis community. I

was fortunate to have been able to get to work with him at San Diego State for many years and soak up so much knowledge. He was very passionate about so many things in life: His family, Tennis, San Diego State, and helping kids along their way, especially through the sport of tennis. Larry was also extremely generous with both his time and his resources, willing to donate both to make the tennis world a little better along the way. It was my pleasure to have been able to call him my

friend for more than half of my life, and he will surely be missed by so many.

Rest in Peace my Friend

—Peter Mattera is head coach of the Aztec women’s team.



WILLENS WATCHING

“I’ll Never Forget One Day During Practice...”

Ryan Redondo: “Larry means more than words can describe to me and the Redondo Family. From coaching my aunt and uncle, to coaching together with the SDSU Men’s Tennis program, we are so grateful for Larry’s heart and mentorship. Larry means so much to so many people and to the sport of tennis. I’ll share two personal moments I’ll never forget: one day during practice I was instructing a player and he gently pulled me aside and told me I should make some adjustments. They seemed simple then but looking back now they were powerful coaching adjustments that I attribute to Larry every time I use them. Secondly, driving back from UNLV after a road trip, Larry sang to the song, “Chasing Waterfalls” and knew every single word! We all love Larry and everything he did for tennis, Youth Tennis San Diego, San Diego State University, and the many organizations he supported.”

— Ryan Redondo is CEO of Youth Tennis San Diego and General Manager of the Barnes Tennis Center as well as a former Director of Tennis and head men’s coach at University of the Pacific in Stockton. An All American at San Diego State, Ryan and his father, Skip Redondo, coached the Aztecs beside Larry Willens for many years.

“Larry shared his knowledge of the game generously.”

Carol Plunkett: “Larry was one of the talented tennis pros and players in the San Diego area and like many others took an interest in the college men’s and women’s tennis teams. Larry shared his knowledge of the game generously and was an upbeat tennis enthusiast who enjoyed promoting the sport. I am very sorry to hear of his passing. **Carol Plunkett, a longtime Aztec women’s coach, was named to the San**

Diego State University Hall of Fame in 1999. According to the hall’s citation, she led the Aztecs to 15 appearances in the NCAA tournament, including a fourth-place finish in 1984, helped produce 18 All-Americans, was the 1985 women’s tennis national coach of the year, coached the Aztecs to 312 dual victories during her career, and was honored as conference coach of the year seven times.

“I AM TRYING TO CARRY ON HIS METHODS (AND) VALUES”

Alex Waske: “I met Larry in 1997 at San Diego State and it had a huge effect on my life. He took a lot of time to talk to me, share his experiences and work on skills with me. The mental development meant a lot to him and little did I understand in the beginning, on how big of an effect this would have for me. He mentioned countless times: “Alex, intensity is a belief” to me, and that is the motto of our academy in Germany now. I am trying to carry on his methods as well as his values, because he first taught the person, not the player.

“Larry also coached me on tour for several years and the more time we spent together, the more of a friend he became. I am sad to never get the opportunity again to speak to my coach, mentor and



WIMBLEDON: WASKE AND WILLENS (ARROW AND CIRCLE)

friend again. I appreciate all he taught me and will always remember his lessons.

—Alex Waske, Founder, Waske Tennis University, Frankfurt, Germany, July 31, 2021

Waske played Aztec tennis (1997-2000), Davis Cup for Germany, defeated Rafael Nadal at Halle, Germany, a Wimbledon warmup event, and reached the doubles semifinals at the Australian and French Opens.

“Countless hours on court with Larry Willens made me stronger and him travelling with me on tour made me a mentally much stronger person. Without Coaches (John) Nelson and Willens, I would be working in a bank and have never experienced playing Davis Cup and all the Grand Slams.”

—Alex Waske, Aztec Tennis Reporter, VOL 12, NO 3, 2011.



HE “KNEW AND UNDERSTOOD THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING NICE”

Larry Belinsky: “Larry and I served on the Barnes Center Youth Tennis Foundation Board together. He was a very dear man with a big heart. In 2010, when he was inducted into the San Diego Tennis Hall of Fame, it was important enough for him to fly in from coaching at the US Open in New York, to personally receive his award. Then, immediately after the presentation, he went right back to the airport to catch a flight to



Larry Willens, Larry Belinsky

New York to resume his coaching responsibilities. He was a very ethical, giving, kind, and caring person. He knew and understood the importance of being nice and considerate to others. He will certainly be missed!”

—Larry Belinsky played Aztec Men’s tennis (1974-76) has often been highly ranked as a USTA Senior player, and is the Founder of the San Diego Tennis Hall of Fame, which inducted Larry Willens 11 years ago.

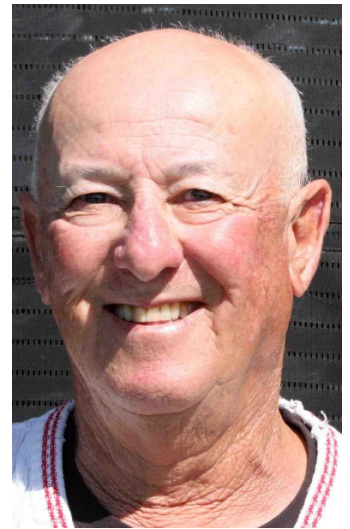
Glimpses of ‘Coach Larry’ Courtside at Aztec Tennis Center



UNDATED



OBSERVING ACTION COURTSIDE: From left, Jeff Thomsen, Associate Men’s Head Coach; Larry Willens, Volunteer Assistant Men’S Coach, and Gene Carswell, Men’s Head Coach.



NOVEMBER 2014

“He Never Wanted Accolades or Credit...”

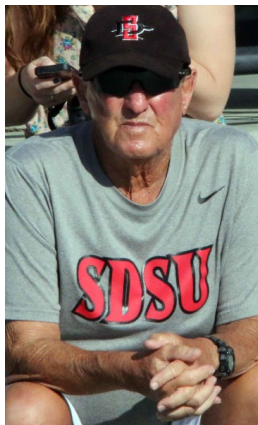


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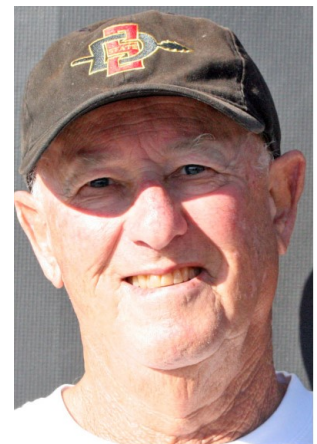
Gene Carswell: “It’s tough to put into words all that Coach Larry was to those of us who spent time with him regularly at SDSU and within the San Diego tennis community. First, he was a Friend. I am fortunate to have spent many quality years with Coach, I will miss him dearly. He was a generous giver with a great passion for all things SDSU. He gave his time, knowledge and financial backing to SDSU Athletics.. Coach Larry had his hand in the team and individual successes in men’s and women’s tennis for the past 30 plus years. The All-Americans, Conference Champions, NCAA Tournament runs, Coach Larry was connected with all of them.. He never wanted accolades or credit, only hoping to see a player or team reach their potential and become the best version of themselves. We will miss Coach dearly.—Gene Carswell is head coach of the Aztec men’s team.



APRIL 2015



UNDATED



UNDATED



SAN DIEGO TENNIS HALL OF FAME

2010 CITATION

Larry Willens

Larry Willens brings years of coaching and philanthropy to San Diego tennis. A graduate of San Jose State University in 1962, he then entered the Navy, attending medical school at Balboa Naval Hospital. While he became a hospital corpsman, Larry also found time to compete for the Navy in basketball and tennis. In 1965, Willens was hired by San Diego State University to teach in the Health Science Department, a position he held for four years. After three years at the USC Physical Education Department, he returned to SDSU in 1972 where he taught Health and Physical Education until 2000. In 1976, Larry was hired as assistant coach for the San Diego Friars of World Team Tennis and he coached Kerry Reid, Cliff Drysdale and Rod Laver. During the off-season, he was the personal coach for Reid at a time when she won the Wimbledon doubles. When the WTT was re-established in 1981, Willens became head coach of the Friars, and the team claimed the championship in 1985. Larry also coached the Sacramento Capitals, as well as the women's and men's teams at SDSU. Other world-class players who have been under his tutelage include Robin White, Abigail Spears Milagros Sequera and Stephen Huss. Willens has been an important supporter of the Barnes Tennis Center, serving on its board, being the tournament director of the Billie Jean King WTT tournament each August and donating courts. Former San Diego Charger Rolf Benirschke and Willens started the Athletic Council for Education foundation which raises money for medical research groups and scholarships at SDSU. Larry is on the Directors Cabinet at the university which helps the tennis facility remain one of the best in the country. Over the course of his career he has been awarded multiple Coach of the Year awards from the United States Professional Tennis Association.

Aztec Coach Larry Willens Selected for SD Tennis Hall of Fame Induction

San Diego State volunteer tennis coach Larry Willens has been selected for induction by the San Diego Tennis Hall of Fame. He completed his 12th year as a volunteer coach at San Diego State last month. He joined the men's team in 2008 after 10 years as the volunteer Aztec women's coach.

The 2010 Hall of Fame inductees include Virginia Glass, community activist and former American Tennis Association President; Bob Perry, the retired La Jolla Tennis Club teaching professional; Bob Bacon, longtime coach of San Diego City College men's teams; and Patricia (Pat) Canning Todd, the 1947 French singles champion and



Larry Willens

Wimbledon doubles titlist. The induction is scheduled August 28 at Morley Field in San Diego.

Willens coached the San Diego Friars, led by Australia's Rod Laver, in the World Team Tennis seasons of 1976-78 and 1981-85. He later coached the Sacramento Capitals for three years.

As a patron of tennis, Willens has donated much of the furnishings and the locker rooms at the Aztec Tennis Center and is a contributor to Youth Tennis San Diego at the Barnes Tennis Center. He recently returned to coaching San Diego's Abigail Spears on the WTA tour. He coaches Australia's Stephen Huss on the ATP men's tour.

Coach Larry Wilens, Aztec Tennis Ambassador



Aztec Tennis Reporter photos

DAY WATCHMAN: Aztec Larry Wilens, at center right, monitors play of Abigail Spears at 2005 Australian Open. Wilens has spent much of the last 25 years coaching on the men's and women's pro tours and at SDSU. He helped Spears at Melbourne (she reached third round), at French Open in Paris, and at Wimbledon.

Globetrotting Tennis Scholar Carries SDSU Flag



Larry Wilens nurtures a dual identity: He helps train San Diego State's men and women as their volunteer tennis coach but disappears in January, May, June, July, and September. There's no mystery: He travels as a coach and logistician to touring professionals, most recently former UCLA Bruin Abigail Spears of San Diego and Aztec Alex Waske of Germany.

In the 1980s, Wilens coached Butch Walts, one of the first big servers on the

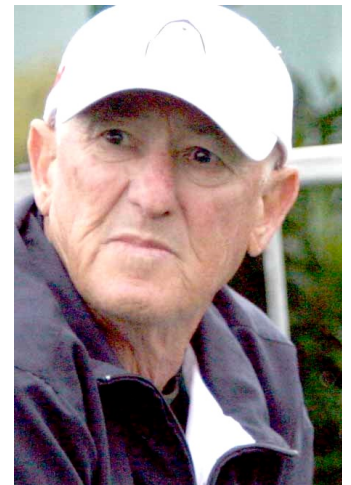
men's tour; Gretchen Magers, once a top junior and later an Aztec volunteer women's coach; and Robin White, who won the 1989 U.S. Open doubles title with Gigi Fernandez.

Wilens had been a top junior athlete but it was his academic prowess that led him into coaching. Graduating from San Jose State in 1962, he did a stint in the Navy; in 1968, he earned a master's degree in motor learning and physical education at San Diego State. Soon, he was coaching baseball at USC and later, at SDSU.

A friend of Billie Jean King since their junior tennis days, Wilens later led the San Diego Friars and Sacramento Capitols in World Team Tennis, acting as coach to Rod Laver, Cliff Drysdale, and Kerry Melville Reid.

Today, circling the globe in Aztec shirts, hats, and tennis gear, Larry Wilens stands out:

He is the friendly, familiar face of San Diego State in the world of international tennis.



NAME DROPPER: In Aztec shirts and caps, Wilens, above with Spears at Wimbledon, takes San Diego State's name to top tennis events in Australia, France, England, and United States.

“Larry encouraged me to be more myself, not what the system wanted.”

Abigail Spears: My condolences first to Larry’s family, I know he will be missed dearly. I met Larry first when I was 9 years old at Ed Collins Tennis Camp and didn’t realize what the future would hold from that very first meeting or the impact that introduction would have on my life.

After I turned pro and had been playing a couple years on tour, my father asked me to seek out Larry’s counsel about the tour and how to improve as a player. Having been told he had experience with the system and with being on tour I met with him again at the age of 22 and we began to work together. He not only helped me believe in myself and my game in making me more consistent and aggressive, but took so much pressure off of me by paying his own way to the tournaments he attended, never seeking the monetary benefit. That showed me that he truly cared for my success and put in so many hours on court with me, never growing tired of all the work, always pushing me to get better.

Larry helped me from around 2003 -2006 very consistently but then off and on after that because travel was very hard on him.

My tendency was to put so much pressure on myself and would become a robot in my black and white world sometimes. Larry encouraged me to be more myself, not what the system wanted. He showed me that I could in fact enjoy traveling and all the world had to offer beyond tennis. I know he has helped so many people and the San Diego community by giving his time and money to care for others. I myself would never have had the success I did without Larry’s help on the court and his life lessons off the court.

Eternally grateful to have had him in my life and honored. So many great memories that I will always cherish. He will be greatly missed. Prayers and hugs to the family.



WINNING SMILES: Spears and Wilens leaving Melbourne court after her 1st round victory in 2005 Australian Open. She reached 3rd round.



World Tennis Gazette photos
SHIFTING GEARS: Abigail Spears spins to attack in 2005 French Open match monitored by Larry Wilens at Roland Garros.

Abigail Spears played college tennis at UCLA before joining the women’s professional tour. She currently lives in Colorado Springs, CO, and told *ATR* she is training for a possible return to tour competition.



VOLLEY TIME: Spears approaches net in her 2014 U.S. Open mixed doubles final, second year in a row she was runner-up.

How Larry Willens Honored His Parents With a Loving Gesture

In a 1943 photo, five-year-old Larry Willens joyfully hugs his father, Harold Willens, a U.S. Marine captain in World War II.

After the war, Harold and Grace Willens (Larry's mother), grew wealthy from investments in manufacturing and real estate. Harold became president of the Beverly Hills Tennis Club.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the couple became peace advocates in Southern California. Alarmed by the possibility of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, they championed



Wikipedia Screen Capture
Harold Willens and son Larry, 5, in 1943 photo.

the idea of a nuclear weapons freeze between the two countries. They also donated to the political campaigns of candidates who supported a negotiated end to the Vietnam War.

One time, according to Wikipedia, the Willens held a political meeting in their Malibu home attended by actors Warren Beatty, Robert Redford, and Paul Newman and songwriter Neil Diamond.

Several years ago, when Larry Willens decided to donate the funds to build team lockers and showers for the new Aztec Tennis Center, he made a loving gesture. He named the structure in honor of Grace and Harold Willens.

“He always went out of his way to help...any way he could...”

Steve Adamson: When I first came to San Diego at age 17 he was the first person I met. He helped coach me and was instrumental in me joining the San Diego State Aztecs. He always greeted me with a friendly jab about my lack of consistency on my groundstrokes followed by a warm smile. He always went out of his way to help me and others in any way he could. Larry will be deeply missed in the tennis community. ***Steve Adamson is Director of Tennis at the Barnes Tennis Center. He played on the Aztec men's team in 1995-1998.***

“On Court He Pushed Athletes...to New Levels ”

John Nelson: Larry Willens generously gave his time, expertise and support to both the men's and the women's tennis programs at San Diego State for many years. His off-court demeanor was always friendly and personable. On court he pushed the athletes out of their comfort zone and helped the athletes develop to new levels. He truly had a positive impact on many students. — ***John Nelson was Aztec men's head coach from 1993-2003. He retired in 2019 as men's head tennis coach at the University of Hawaii.***

“He Gave...to Tennis All Across The Board.”

Lornie Kuhle: In this world, there' are givers and takers. Larry Willens is a giver. That's the quality that stands out the most about Larry. He gave time, he gave financial efforts to tennis all across the board, I saw him at the Grand Slam tournaments. He always had some top players with him that he was coaching. Not that long ago, I was involved in helping bring the Davis Cup to San Diego when we played Great Britain, at Petco Park. I reached out to Larry, and he just gave us a super, super generous donation. — ***Lornie Kuhle is tournament director of the USTA Billie Jean King National Girl's Tennis Championship at the Barnes Family Tennis Center in San Diego. He formerly coached Bobby Riggs and directed tennis for 45 years at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas.***