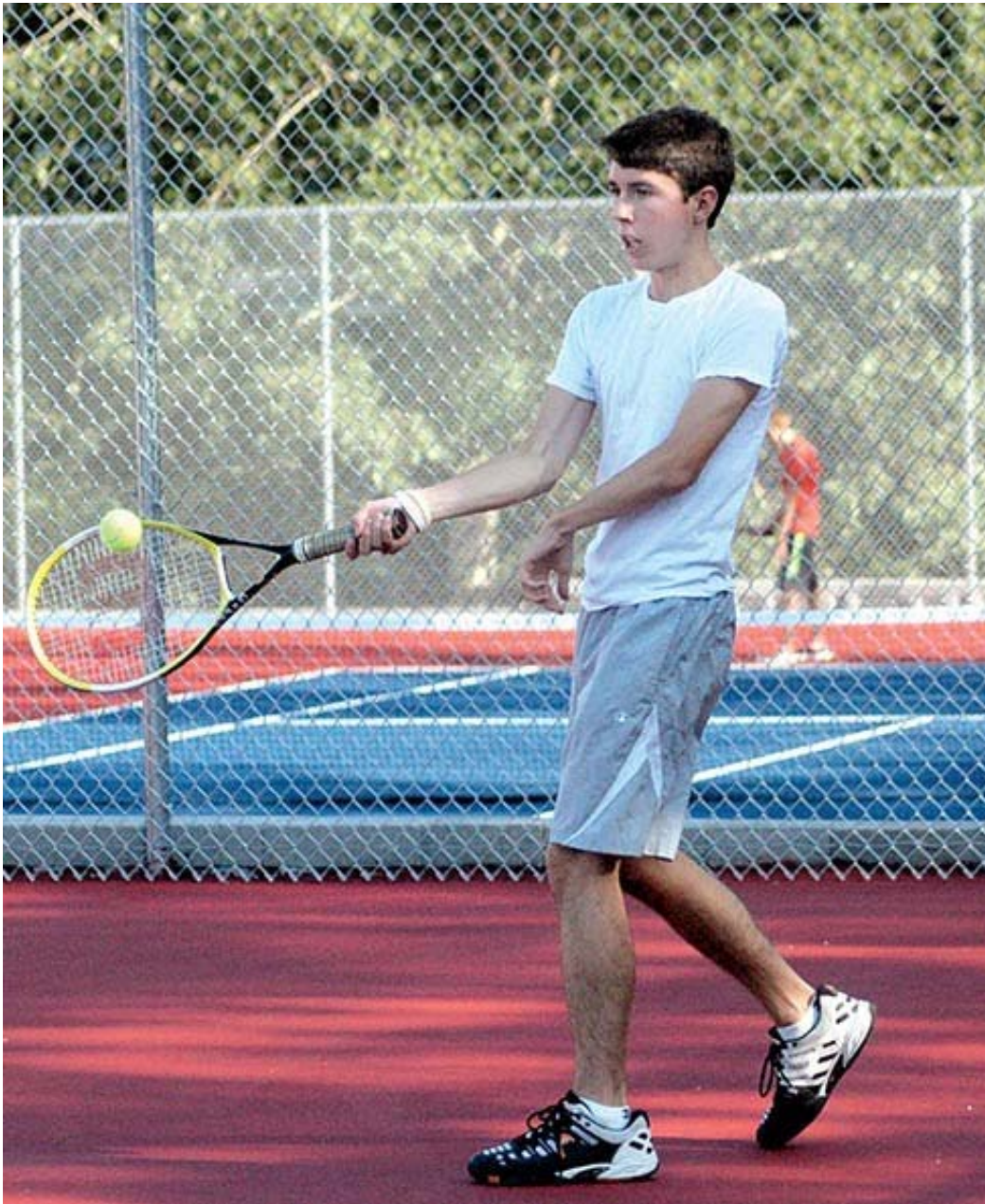


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Nomads no longer, Mount tennis comes home



Woonsocket resident and Mount St. Charles Academy student Peter Soucy returns a volley while participating in the first Mount St. Charles Academy tennis camp at the school's new courts on Logee Street last week. (Valley Breeze photo by Paul R. Dubois)

New 6-court facility opens on Bernon Heights

By **PAUL R. DUBOIS**, Breeze Sports Editor

WOONSOCKET - Lincoln resident Jake Haddad has been playing tennis for four years, and as a member of last year's Mount St. Charles Academy boys Jayvee tennis team, has played at some of the best tennis facilities Rhode Island has to offer.

"This one is the best I've ever played on or seen," the 16-year-old said while attending the first Mount St. Charles Academy summer tennis camp at the just-completed six-court complex on Logee Street. "This is a great addition to the Mount campus."

Woonsocket resident and Mount junior Peter Soucy, a member of last year's Jayvee team that finished second in the state tournament, added that the courts are a big plus for the Mount campus.

"This is a really great addition for our school and hopefully it will generate more enthusiasm for the sport," said Soucy.

Located on a formerly vacant two-acre rock-filled lot across the street from the Mount campus, the new \$850,000 facility was completed last month by Cumberland's Catalano Construction and fulfilled a dream for long-time MSC tennis coach Richard Lawrence.

His teams have been nomads for three decades, forced to rent facilities and play nothing but "away" matches because the school did not have any tennis facility.

"People are coming to me and everyone thinks that they are my courts, but they aren't," said Lawrence. "They're part of the whole package here at Mount and all students will benefit from them through physical education classes. We were very fortunate to have some very generous people step up to make this possible. And we basically took two acres of dead land that we owned and turned it into a great complex."

Surrounded by 8- and 10-foot chain link fencing with locked gates, the courts are tiered to accommodate the sloping terrain. A new walkway and crosswalk leading from the main campus to the courts have been installed for student safety.

Wasting no time, Lawrence began the first summer tennis camp in the school's history immediately after the project was completed in July.

"It rained a little on the first day, but the kids and everyone else was so anxious, that we played anyway," said Lawrence. "Everyone loves it."

Despite the fact that Mount tennis has not had a "home," the program has been one of the elite in Rhode Island. Since the boys team was founded in 1973, it has won 21 championships, including four state titles, the last coming in spring when the Mounties captured the Division II championship.

But it's the girls who have excelled. Since 1984, the Lawrence-coached teams have taken 23 championships, including eight state titles. In addition, the girls Junior Varsity team has won five championships, including two state titles, in the past seven seasons.

"We've had that rich history despite the fact that we've never really had our own courts," said Lawrence, who has stepped down from head coaching duties, but still is an assistant coach to girls coach Marissa Pitrone-Marsh and boys head coach Sean McClelland.

"I call myself a practice coach," said Lawrence. "And now we'll save a lot of time because instead of busing to an outside location, we'll be walking across the street to practice."

It was a long road. The parcel had been zoned for residential use, so Mount was required to obtain the approval of the Woonsocket Zoning Board of Review for a special use permit that allowed the

project to move forward.

Academy officials also had to fund-raise to get the project off the ground.

Because of the sloping topography of the land and ledge that had been encountered, the original estimated cost of the court complex was increased from \$600,000 to \$850,000.

Design engineer John Ford said that the new courts have three levels, with two courts per level, and each of the two-court complexes surrounded by fencing.

"Because of the slope and ledge, it was either go to a unique tiered system, or make one flat surface with all six courts which would have required a steep wall at the end of the courts," said Ford. "This was far more esthetically pleasing."

Lawrence said when he began the boys tennis program at Mount in 1973, the academy only had two concrete tennis courts that were located near the baseball field. While the team could practice there, it wasn't really suitable for Interscholastic League play.

"We've been all over the place since then," he said. "We used the courts at Bernon Park, and at one point, we actually had people come in and line the hockey arena floor, which gave us the only indoor courts in the league."

A couple of years later, the program shifted to Dunn Memorial Park on Mason Street, and when the city built its new courts on Aylsworth Avenue, MSC tennis moved to that location. But then Woonsocket High School started its tennis program, and Mount was forced off those courts and into finding a new location.

The team used the courts in the former World War II Veterans Memorial State Park, which no longer exist.

Finally, in 1991, the team began leasing the Highridge Tennis Club facility in Lincoln, and they've been there ever since. Lawrence said the new courts are a personal dream come true, and expressed his thanks to the Mount alumni and their families who generously donated to the project.

Haddad was not alone in lavishing praise on the new facility.

Caroline Cardoso, 15, of Cumberland, a Mount sophomore who was on last year's Varsity team, said the smooth, sleek courts are great.

"There's no cracks in the playing surface and never any puddles," she said.

Cumberland resident Dan Bowen, 15, a junior, pointed out that Mount has had a very strong tennis program, garnering about 40 state tennis titles.

"But I'm really glad for Mr. Lawrence, who has been so passionate about this sport and has done so much for Mount tennis," said Bowen.

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