

The Western Ontario Open Tennis Championship



Waterloo Tennis Club Players win Western Ontario Crowns 1949

L-R: Ralph Tailby, men's singles winner; Jacqueline Merner, women's doubles; Jack Kolehler, men's and mixed doubles; Ben Berscht, men's doubles; inset: Marg Ferguson, women's singles, doubles and mixed doubles.

Photo credit: K-W Record Collection, University of Waterloo Library

The Western Ontario Open Tennis Championship or simply The Western, originated around 1914 but there is very little in the way of records before 1934. It was considered a high level tournament, attracting fine players from across Canada and from U.S. states such as Maine, New Hampshire, Michigan, Indiana, New York, California and Florida because the tournament served as a warm-up for the Canadian Open.

The Waterloo Tennis club first hosted The Western in 1939 after an unsuccessful bid in 1938. Because the K-W 'Y' tennis club had hosted it from 1935 - 1937, the tournament was not unfamiliar to the club. Waterloo hosted it a second time in 1954 and thereafter in 1963 to 1988 with the exception of 1971 and 1977. The tennis clubs in London and St. Thomas had hosted the tournament in the years after World War II and decided they had done it long enough.

Helen Nethercott, a Waterloo club member, recommended that Waterloo take on the challenge of the tournament and with the support of fellow Waterloo club members Ron Wagner and Andy Kerr, who were on the Western Ontario Tennis Board, the tournament came to Waterloo. And a challenge it was for the non-profit club. Helen was a major force in organizing the matches which were played not only on the club's four clay courts, but also Mutual Life's six clay courts, those in the Beechwood community and in Galt (Cambridge).

Sandy Morgan, a former club pro and tournament chair of The Western from 1973-1979, was encouraged by the volunteer contributions of the forty or more club members who helped to ensure the success of the tournament. Volunteers sent out hand-written invitations to players a month prior to the tournament and then worked in various jobs as match referees, lines people, court maintenance crews, ball persons, facility preparation, kitchen and bar staff, a photographer to record the day's events, parking attendants and organizing the Saturday night festivities.



Ian Dagg - one of many club volunteers serving as match officials.

Photo credit: Waterloo Tennis Club



The Western in 1979

Photo credit: Waterloo Tennis Club

Despite the work the tournament was exciting and rewarding. The club hosted a dance on the Saturday night for players and club members. Sandy Morgan remembered a memorable Saturday evening after the dance when fourteen players came to his home on Brandon Avenue and ended up sleeping overnight on his living room floor. The Sunday morning breakfast was organized chaos!

One of the most complex tasks of the Western was making the draw and scheduling the matches. The club did the draw but an official from the OTA would check that it had been correctly. In the early years there were around 60 to 70 men and anywhere from 27 to 36 women registered for the tournament. Helen Nethercott remembered in 1963 there were around 150 men in the draw. She went to Galt to oversee the women's draw leaving Ed Brandreth, the club pro with the men. When she returned on

Saturday night to Waterloo she discovered that Ed had yet to complete the second round. Fortunately both finalists were from Detroit so they played the last match there and sent the result back to the club.

In 1973 the tournament reached an all-time high in registrations of 198 players. There was also the additional attraction of \$1,000 prize money as the club had obtained Budd Automotive as a sponsor. With free admission the K-W record reported the event having up to 5,000 spectators.

This success was not to last however, as more tournaments with bigger prize monies appeared. In 1980 Pop Shoppe and Grandma Lee sponsored The Western with a total of \$1,500 prize money. The tournament date conflicted with the Canadian Closed held in Winnipeg and as a result only 93 men and 18 women registered for The Western, a big drop from the average of around 150. Interest continued to decline and in 1985 the dates of the tournament again clashed with the Canadian Closed. The prize money for the national tournament was \$30,000 while the Western, now sponsored by Mutual Life offered \$3,000. A request by Ontario Tennis to change the date from the usual Civic Holiday weekend to another weekend was not convenient as the tournament needed four days to complete. The club called it quits after the 1988 tournament.



The Western in 1979

Jerry Karzen was the winner of the Men's Singles. Here he is receiving the Men's Trophy from Sandy Morgan.

Photo credit: Waterloo Tennis Club



K-W CHAMPION – Inge Weber of the Twin Cities holds the trophy she won at the Western Ontario tennis championships in Waterloo yesterday.

Photo credit: Record Photos

Waterloo members were among the tournament champions particularly in the earlier years. Ralph Tailby was the men's singles champion in 1949, 1950, and 1952. Jackie Merner won the women's title in 1946 and 1950 and the doubles from 1949 to 1952. Mrs. Marg Ferguson won the triple crown in both 1949 and 1951. Inge Weber won the women's title nine times between 1953-1970. From the Region there was also Mary Ann Gaskin who won the women's singles title in 1967 and the doubles with Vera Komar in 1972 and 1979. Vera Komar won the singles title in 1972 and 1974, and Kathy Morton won in 1977. Jane Young, the hometown star got to the final in 1981-1983, before finally winning the title in her fourth final in 1984.

The Western was a very special tournament for the Waterloo Tennis Club for two important reasons - the monetary benefits gained from the tournament which helped to finance various clubhouse upgrades and the opportunity for the members of the club and the community to view a high level of tennis. Twenty years later, in 2008 the club, reviving its past footprint, held an International Tennis Federation event - a \$25,000 Challenger event for women that ran for six years.

Written by Mary Liz Hearn, edited by Pat Craton.



Rene Simpson claimed the Mutual Life Trophy as the women's singles champion. (1988)



Lorne MacKinnon, Vice-President, Human Resources, presents men's singles champion, Ernesto Lingen, with the winner's cheque. (1988)