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## Jake Propst, local tennis legend, dies at 95



William Jacob Propst

[Birney Imes](#)  
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Over the course of his long life, William Jacob Propst was a college athlete, World War II fighter pilot, professional baseball player, cattle farmer, insurance salesman ... and he played tennis.

Propst died Friday at Baptist Memorial Hospital-Golden Triangle. He was 95 and those who knew him simply referred to him as "Jake."

To say Propst played tennis is a bit like saying Willie Shoemaker rode horses. In addition to being a dominant presence on the local and state tennis scene for half a century, Propst and his doubles partners were formidable in regional and national amateur tournament play.

In 1991, when Propst was 71, he and his partner, Laney Berry, of New Hebron, were runners-up in their age division in the National Clay Court Championships in Washington, D.C.

Faced with the opportunity of being congratulated by President Bill Clinton, Propst, a die-hard Republican, was conflicted. He expressed his misgivings to the president personally.

"I can't shake your hand," Propst told Clinton, "I didn't vote for you."

"That's OK," Clinton said, taking Propst's hand. "It's just good to hear a Southern accent."

"You know, I kinda liked the guy," Propst told a friend later.

Jake Propst grew up on Columbus' Southside, the son of the owner of a livery stable who had a brief flirtation with major league baseball. Bill Propst would donate land to the city for a park that now bears his name and three times was elected mayor.

Jake grew up in a time when sports was the most obvious and accessible diversion for kids. His introduction to tennis came when an uncle, James Propst, built a tennis court in Jake's backyard.

"All the kids in the neighborhood came over and that's how we learned to play," Jake said in a 1991 interview.

The good humor and easy-going nature Propst was known for manifested itself early.

"As you undoubtedly know by now, Jake was our best camper for 1936," wrote the director of Camp Ridgecrest, a Baptist camp in North Carolina, to Propst's father. "This is the highest award given to a camper, and nothing more need be said concerning Jake's cheerfulness, cooperative spirit and outstanding ability. It was a distinct pleasure to have him with us ..."

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Propst was a gifted athlete, regardless of the game. He earned five high school letters, and at the University of Mississippi he lettered in baseball and tennis.

Tennis had little significance at Ole Miss, a point noted by tennis partner and friend Bobby Jones in his introductory remarks at Propst's induction into the Mississippi Tennis Hall of Fame in 1995.

"A lot of days he would play a baseball game and then run over to the tennis courts for a match," said Jones.

Ole Miss didn't give tennis scholarships or tennis letters in those days. Propst received his tennis letter from his alma mater 30 years after the fact.

"It just showed up in the mail," he told Jones.

After college Propst played minor league baseball until he was called to serve in the Army Air Corps during World War II. He flew a P-47 fighter over Italy and other than a brush with friendly fire was unscathed.

Dudley Bearden's friendship with Propst began when Bearden, then 12, began hanging out at the Columbus Tennis Club. The club consisted of four red clay courts wrought from an overgrown lot across the road from a garment plant on the south side of town.

In those days local tennis clubs would field six-man teams to compete with their counterparts from other towns, places like Jasper, Bessemer, Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

"We would stay in firehouses," Bearden remembers.

Bearden would travel to those matches with Propst. That time together and the older man's on-the-court mentoring of the young player led to a life-long friendship. About his late friend, Bearden has no shortage of stories.

"When we were playing at Sandfield (Columbus Tennis Club), Jake got a nail in his tire, and we went around looking for a place to get it fixed," said Bearden. "He was so frugal. They all wanted \$2 to fix the tire and Jake wanted it plugged for \$1. I bet we went to six places (before we found someone who would plug it)."

Bearden recalled visits with his friend at his farm near Crawford where Propst lived with his wife, Martha. Sometimes those visits would become something more than a social call.

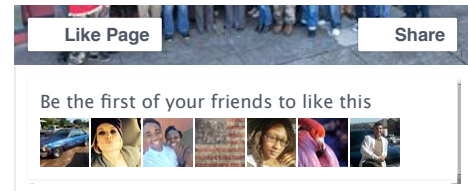
"He would make Martha and me stand in the middle of the highway (Highway 45 A) and stop traffic while he moved his cows across the road," said Bearden.

Musing on Propst's long life and enduring good cheer, Bearden offered a seemingly simple explanation.

"He didn't have any stress in his life. Everywhere he went, he played tennis."

*Birney Imes III is the Editor and Publisher of The Dispatch.*

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