

More Than a Tennis Coach: A Mentor and Friend
Manning Snyder, Neighborhood Correspondent

Tom Higgins knows how to handle troublemakers.

While a college head tennis coach at Eastern Kentucky, one of his players wasn't going to class. Higgins decided to do something about it.

"For two weeks, I made him get up at 5:30 a.m. and meet me at the basketball gym," Higgins said in a slow, Southern drawl. "I would make him run up and down the bleachers."

Higgins said that he would run behind him ("back when I had knees") and hit him on the "ass" if he caught up to him.

"I probably couldn't do that today," Higgins said with a chuckle.

But the punishment worked. Higgins said the player never missed another class.

"Each year, I get a phone call around November from him," Higgins said. "He says three words every time and then hangs up the phone."

"Thank you, Coach."

But Higgins was more than just a coach.

"I was a part-time disciplinarian," Higgins said. "But a full-time mentor."

Now 77, Higgins sits at a Charleston, South Carolina restaurant, sporting a white polo shirt and grey gym shorts. He walks with a noticeable limp, a wobble of sorts, and drives a 2007 white Ford F150. After ordering a sweet tea (no lemon) and a grilled chicken salad ("my cholesterol is only going up," he quipped), Higgins prepared to discuss his life of mentoring young adults on and off the tennis court.

"Where do you want me to start?" he asked, taking a swig of his sweet tea.

After playing collegiate tennis at Murray State University, Higgins knew he wanted to serve his country, either in the Army or the FBI. Following a few years of military training, Higgins was sent to Vietnam for two years in 1967 as a combat soldier.

“I heard so many zing, zing, zings,” Higgins said, referencing the sound of bullets in the Vietnam War. “I thought I was in a beehive.”

Upon his return to the United States, he transitioned to the F.B.I in the role of “Special Agent.”

“I was receiving assignments directly off the desk of J. Edgar Hoover,” Higgins said, referencing the first FBI director.

In his three years of service, Higgins, along with his wife and young children, lived in four different cities in the United States—Cleveland, Washington D.C., Cincinnati, and Charleston, West Virginia.

“The moving was the reason I got out,” said Higgins. “I made a choice between being married to the FBI or married to my wife.”

Upon brainstorming about his career options, Higgins didn’t exactly know what to do, but he wanted stability. He didn’t want to move his family anymore.

Enter Eastern Kentucky University.

A public university located in Richmond, Kentucky (population 36,157), the university participated in the same Division I athletic conference (Ohio Valley) as Murray State. In 1972, the school was looking for a head men’s and women’s tennis coach. Higgins decided to interview for the position.

“The job was an afterthought,” said Higgins. “I didn’t really think I was going to take it.”

29 years of coaching at ECU later, Higgins ranked in the Top 14 of NCAA tennis coaches in total number of victories. The Eastern Kentucky tennis courts were even named the “Tom Higgins” tennis courts in 2007.

His afterthought had evolved into a dynasty.

Before accepting the job, Higgins articulated his goal to develop ECU into one of the most competitive mid-major tennis programs in the country. He also wanted to teach classes in the Health Science department on the causes of drug and alcohol addictions, referencing what he had learned during his time in the FBI.

“Once I knew I wanted the job, I started brainstorming all these ways I could develop the program,” Higgins said.

During a conversation with then-EKU president Robert Martin, Higgins experienced a “nirvana” moment.

“A light switch immediately flashed on in my head,” Higgins said. “I wanted to build indoor courts.”

In 1972, only two other colleges in the country had indoor tennis courts: University of Wisconsin and Sewanee, the University of the South. Martin approved the plan and saw it through to fruition. In January of 1977, the facility was completed.

One of the reasons Higgins wanted indoor courts was to ensure that his players could play tennis the entire year, not just when the weather was pleasant.

“We could play matches in January when no one else was playing,” Higgins said. “Even if it rained, we [the team] were not going to miss any practice time.”

Higgins won 339 matches during his tenure and coached hundreds of players. Two of them –Joe Shaheen and Steve Alscher– played for a while on the professional circuit. “In the top-200 range,” according to Higgins. But while winning on the tennis court was a priority for Higgins, he was more interested in the academic development of his players. Around 94% of his student-athletes earned their degrees under the direction of Higgins.

“That makes me the most proud,” Higgins said.

While Eastern Kentucky was enjoying success on the court, Higgins received offers for head coaching positions at both LSU and Auburn. But there was one catch: he couldn’t teach college classes.

“I opted to stay with the academic tenure and the coaching security rather than going the big time route,” Higgins said. “Looking back, it looks like it was a pretty good decision.”

Along with the coaching security, Eastern Kentucky’s small community let him serve as a father-figure to all of his players.

“Coaching at the mid-major level, you dealt with the player as a whole,” Higgins said, referencing the academic, athletic, and personal sides of his players. “You didn’t defer to anyone else.”

Caring for the whole person, according to Higgins, meant emphasizing the importance of hard work and respect in life.

“What he left inside of others is amazing,” Chuck Kriese, head tennis coach at The Citadel and friend of Higgins, said. “He made them better people.”

After retiring from collegiate coaching at Eastern Kentucky in 2003, Higgins and his second wife decided to move to the Charleston coast. They both had family there and enjoyed the amiable weather.

“I had to do something,” Higgins said, finding himself with a copious amount of free time after the move. “I didn’t know anyone there.”

Fortunately, Porter-Gaud, a private K-12 school in Charleston, needed a high school tennis coach. Higgins was interested, but he wasn’t sure.

“The athletic director told me I can have the job if I wanted it,” Higgins said. “I said, I’ll try it a year.”

One year turned into two. Two into three. And then...eleven.

During his tenure as head coach (2003-2014), Porter-Gaud won seven boys and three girls state championships. Higgins was elected into the Porter-Gaud Athletic Hall of Fame in 2015.

“I’ve been in athletics a long time,” Ed Steers, former Porter-Gaud athletic director who hired Higgins, said. “He was the best hire I ever made.”

Today, Higgins is still involved with the school, serving as an assistant coach. He also teaches Sunday School to eighty-year-old members of his church and mingles with other tennis coaches in the Lowcountry area.

“He’s the most down-to-earth and meat-and-potatoes man you will ever meet,” Kriese said. “I would drive a hundred miles just to eat a Snickers bar and talk with the guy.”