Avis Murray
Cape Ann Tennis Legend, Forerunner, and Advocate of Women’s Athletics
by Juliana C. Hood

Playing tennis at the Manchester Athletic Club, circa 1976.
Photo Credit: Joan Chandler
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On Cape Ann, if you hear the name Avis Murray, it is immediately associated with the sport of tennis. For almost five decades, Avis has been playing, teaching, coaching, mentoring, and supporting the game of tennis across Cape Ann and the North Shore. Her exceptional playing ability gained her a #1 Doubles ranking in New England Tennis tournaments as well as numerous #1 United States Professional Tennis Association rankings in singles and doubles. Her expansive career gained her many teaching certificates, accolades in the tennis world, induction into the USTA New England Tennis Hall of Fame, and three tennis courts named in her honor. Avis’s humbleness would never reveal all that she has accomplished but one thing she is never shy to express is her fondness for the place where it all began, Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Avis’s grandparents Justus and Estella (Gross) Johannson (name changed to Johnson at Ellis Island) were married in July 1904 and settled in Gloucester on Exchange Street. Justus emigrated from Oslo, Norway, and Estella from Nova Scotia. They had three children, Karl, Stuart, and Ruth (Avis’s mother). Years later, Ruth married and gave birth to a baby girl Stella, and Avis came along in 1935. Ruth moved herself and her daughters into her parents’ home in Gloucester after she became estranged from her husband. Avis was very young when her grandfather died; she barely remembered him. That left Avis in a house filled with hard-work-
ing, loving women which proved to be a guiding force for things to come.

Some of Avis’s earliest memories of Gloucester started when her grandmother would care for her while her mother Ruth went to work at W.T. Grant on Main Street. (Ruth started at 10 cents an hour and worked there for 37 years!) Avis’s grandmother worked as a cook at the Central Grammar School during the school year and at The Cupboard in Stage Fort Park during the summer. Conveniently for the kids, Stage Fort offered swimming lessons and a variety of summertime activities. For Avis, the summers at Stage Fort bring back the fondest memories, and Stage Fort remains one of Avis’s favorite places. Avis and her grandmother would stroll from Hampden Street, where they resided, to Stage Fort Park early in the morning. From there, Avis would walk to Cressy’s Beach for a packed day of swimming lessons and recreational programs. At the end of the day, she would meet her grandmother at The Cupboard, and they walked home together. This brings credit to why Stage Fort Park and the Boulevard are Avis’s favorite places in Gloucester.

Living close to the Boulevard, Avis recalled harsh winter snowstorms when the streets were closed, and the neighborhood children happily sled down steep Hampden Hill at great speed. A notable neighbor, Roger Babson, lived close by. Roger often hired Avis’s grandmother to cook dinner for guests at his house. His house had a stone fence with a marked area about the size of a home plate. Avis practiced throwing the baseball at the wall to hone her skills in preparation for the neighborhood pick-up games with the boys. Pick-up baseball games were the norm on the Gloucester High School field and even in Roger Babson’s backyard. Was this the beginning of Avis’s lifelong sports career?

When Avis attended Gloucester High School (GHS), varsity sports teams for girls at the school were non-existent. The intramural sports didn’t have the competitive edge Avis craved at this
point. So, she and other girls in the same position formed a YMCA girls’ basketball team. They raised money by selling candy, bought themselves red satin jackets, and called the team the “Swishers.” The team arranged games to compete with area CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) girls’ teams. Another outlet for competitive basketball was on the court at the police station. The Police Athletic League had an auxiliary team formed by members of the Swishers.

Not only did Avis shine in basketball, but she also played baseball. She and Annie Gosbee from Essex were the first two girls to play junior league baseball while in high school. They both played second base. Annie went on to play in the All-American Women’s Professional Baseball League. Avis was only a freshman in high school at the time. Determined to have her voice heard about starting girls’ varsity sports teams at the high school, Avis ran for Student Government with a girls’ sports platform and won the election.
She also proudly served Junior Government on the School Committee.

Avis was recognized by her peers as Most Athletic Girl and graduated number one in her class. The year after her high school graduation, GHS formed the first girls’ field hockey team, a little too late for the likes of Avis. While finding ways for girls to play competitive sports wasn’t easy, Avis persevered. Her dedication to promoting women in sports over the years (primarily in tennis) was noticed. In 1993, Avis was inducted into the Gloucester High School Hall of Fame as a Forerunner of Women’s Athletics, class of 1955.

Avis was interested in basketball and baseball, but how did she enter the tennis world? After graduation, going to college wasn’t feasible for her, so she joined the full-time workforce as a secretary at Gloucester High School. However, she always had a desire to serve her country. Avis worked as a secretary for over a year before her mother signed papers allowing her to enter the U.S. Army. For nine years, from 1956–1965, Avis fulfilled her service. This stint took her from Alabama to Indiana, to Brooklyn, New York, and finally to Germany. Her position as a secretary ranged from serving in the transportation office to the Army legal office. Avis then leaped to Company Clerk, then secretary to General Charles Tank, and the Chief of Staff in New York for four years.

Avis loved working in the New York position but was transferred to Germany. She was in public relations there and continued to play sports like basketball, softball, volleyball, and bowling. After six years of continued service, Avis returned home to her beloved Gloucester and her family. She began working at Cape Ann Savings Bank, but banker’s hours didn’t agree with her. When she got out of work at 2 o’clock, she couldn’t just stay home. Her friends were married or in college or busy with their lives. She had 90 days to decide if she wanted to return to service; on the 89th day, she chose a return to the Army. She was stationed at Fort Devens in
Ayer, Massachusetts, not far from Gloucester. Her time at Fort Devens was where she found her passion for tennis.

It all started when Avis was invited to play competitive tennis in a tournament at West Point by a friend who asked her to play simply because Avis was athletic and owned a tennis racquet. Up to this point, Avis had never played tennis competitively. She needed a tennis cram session, but with whom? As luck would have it, an Army Major Reservist, Roger Bannister, who saw her practicing at Fort Devens, willingly gave her lessons and pointers so she could start to play competitively. Avis’s interest in tennis and skills in tennis grew over time, and when she returned home to Gloucester on weekends, she would teach her dear friend and tennis partner, Rose Sawyer, all she had learned on the GHS tennis courts.

After three years of continued service, she left the Army and returned to full-time office work in Boston at an insurance company. Again, this type of employment didn’t suit her. She needed more. After much deliberation with herself and others, Avis heard about a summer job teaching tennis at Bass Rocks Golf Club (BRGC) in Gloucester. She contacted the head of the tennis division and was offered the position the next day. She quit her year-round benefited job in Boston to work three months a year and never looked back almost fifty years later!

Indoor tennis saved Avis as far as year-round employment. The Manchester Athletic Club (MAC) had the first indoor courts in the area. Avis quickly became the Tennis Director, sharing her talents between the two tennis clubs, the MAC and BRGC. While she semi-retired as the Tennis Director at the MAC years ago, she continued as the tennis director at BRGC.

Honors & Awards

Avis’s credits in the tennis field are numerous, including the USTA New England Ten-
nis Hall of Fame, the USPTA New England as a 1st year Hall of Fame inductee, and the Gloucester High School Athletic Hall of Fame. In 2009, the Gloucester Fishermen’s Association presented Avis with the Avis Murray Award for Extraordinary Contributions to Gloucester Athletics. The Avis Murray award is given to worthy citizens of Gloucester that meet the criteria. She was the first recipient. In 2013, the United States Professional Tennis Association awarded Avis the Alex Gordon USPTA National Professional of the Year award in Orlando, Florida. She was the first female recipient to receive this prestigious award. Remarkably, Avis also served on many committees, including the President of the USPTA New England Board. (You can find a list of her credits at the end of this story.)

Three tennis courts are named after Avis, at the MAC, at the BRGC, and on the Boulevard at Stage Fort Park, with the latter court being the most nostalgic for her. As a child, she saw those tennis courts while walking with her grandmother to work and desperately wanted to play. Avis’s grandmother bought her a $5 tennis racket, and her first tennis balls were hit on those courts as a kid. Not surprisingly, Avis loved to fish in the harbor and swim in it too. She said she probably hit the first ball in the harbor because she wanted to go for a swim after it.

Mayor Sefatia Romeo Theken honors Avis with the naming of the tennis court at Stage Fort Park, 2018.
Family Connections

Avis was fortunate to enjoy close relationships with her grandmother and her mother, Ruth. When Ruth retired from W.T. Grant, she didn’t hesitate to work with Avis at BRGC. Ruth was a favorite assistant in the BRGC’s tennis shop. Her years of retail customer service also proved successful in the tennis shop. Ruth greeted everyone with a bright smile. She supported Avis with administrative tasks and even called members for overdue payments! This proves Avis’s desire to work until she can’t is an inherited trait. Ruth loved life, family, work, and her community for 94 fulfilled years. When Ruth’s work was done, she would relax outside the tennis shop with a book or a crossword puzzle, delighting in the spectacular view of the Twin Lighthouses while chatting with tennis members or watching tennis matches.

Ruth also accompanied Avis on her annual trips to Hilton Head and many tennis conventions. When attending conventions together, Avis recalled that her mother would record one seminar while Avis participated in another. Avis, a lifelong learner, didn’t want to miss any new and vital tennis world news.
Besides her mother, Avis’s sister Stella and her husband George Byard supported and guided Avis through many decisions, especially before her tennis career. They had two children, Mark and Donna. Mark is a Gloucester fisherman who owns the F/V Melon 11. Donna married Thomas Lupo, who is a Gloucester lobsterman. They raised three children, Kevin, Salvatore, and Jessica. A younger daughter, Jennie Faye, passed away at the tender age of 2 years. As far as further family history goes, it was revealed to Avis in 2018 that she has a half-sister on her father’s side, Dottie Disalvo, and her husband, Dom.

A Legacy Continues

What is Avis’s motivation to continue working and teaching well into retirement? By teaching children tennis, Avis helps them build character and self-confidence. This natural talent proves strong. Countless former tennis students continue to enroll their children in tennis lessons with Avis. Remarkably, at 84 years old, the legacy continues.
LIST OF AVIS MURRAY’S HONORS AND AWARDS

**United States Tennis Association (USTA)**
Including USTA, New England (USTA, NE)

USTA, NE, #2 Women’s 35 Doubles Ranking, 1982; 35 and 45 & Over Doubles, 1982–1985
USTA Joseph Deitz Award Winner, 1993 and 2013
USTA #1 Women’s 45 Doubles Ranking, 1995
USTA 8.0 National Super Seniors Champions, 2009
USTA Ned Weld Award to Individual Growing the Game with Juniors and Adults, 2011
USTA, NE Highest Honor – Gardner Chase Ward Memorial Award, 2016
USTA, NE Irving Levine Memorial Award for Lifetime Dedication to Tennis, 2021

**United States Professional Tennis Association (USPTA)**
Including USPTA, New England (USPTA, NE)

USPTA Professional since 1970
USPTA NE Division Pro of the Year, 1993
USPTA NE Senior Player of the Year
USPTA NE Super Senior Play of the Year
USPTA NE Coach of the Year, 1993
USPTA National 45 and over Player of the Year, 1996
Nationally ranked USPTA #1 Women’s 55 and 60 Singles
Nationally ranked USPTA #1 Women’s 45, 50, 55 and 60 Doubles with Betty Walsh
USPTA Master Professional Certification, 2002 (highest level of the profession)
National Professional of the Year, 2013 (13,000 members)
USPTA New England Presidents Award, 2017

**Professional Tennis Registry (PTR)**
PTR Massachusetts Member of the Year Award, 2017

**Gloucester Fisherman’s Athletic Association (GFAA)**
In 2009, the GFAA Named an Avis Murray Award for Extraordinary Contributions to Gloucester Athletics. Presented the first award to Avis Murray.

**Courts Named in Avis Murray’s Honor**
Bass Rocks Golf Club, 1993
Manchester Athletic Club, 2002
City of Gloucester at Stage Fort Park, 2018

**Hall of Fame & Other Inductions**
Gloucester High School Athletic Hall of Fame, 1993
USTA New England Tennis Hall of Fame, Newport, R.I. 2009
USPTA New England Tennis Hall of Fame, 2014
WTCA Inducted into the Women’s Tennis Coaches Association Legacy Circle, 2022

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Juliana Hood has known Avis for over 25 years as a good friend and an amazing tennis teacher.