

# North news

## OVERHEARD: FORUM

*The Eastern North Carolina Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society will host the Tenth Annual MS Research Night on Thursday, May 15 at the Marriott Raleigh Crabtree Valley. Seating is limited, so registration by May 9 is strongly encouraged. To register, call 1-800 FIGHT MS.'*

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## At 40, racquet club still has game

By SUSAN LONDON  
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In 1964, Marshall Happer was one of a group of tennis players who had few good options when it came to places to play.

"You either played at public facilities, as I did, or at a country club," Happer said.

The players had an arrangement to use courts at N.C. State University, but in 1966 they were told the university could no longer accommodate them.

And at the country club, golfers were not happy to share their facilities with avid tennis players.

"Golfers said, 'If the tennis players don't shut up, we're going to make all the tennis courts into a putting green!'" Happer recalled.

The group incorporated the Raleigh Racquet Club in 1967 and began looking for property for its own facility. An old dairy farm on Falls of Neuse Road was available at an asking price of \$3,800 an acre. The group solicited members door-to-door — or, as Happer recalls, harassed everyone he could think of.

"I can remember walking down Fayetteville Street every day with applications in my briefcase and folks would literally cross the street to avoid my solicitation," said Happer, a lawyer at the time.

But eventually, the group secured commitments for 125 memberships at \$350 apiece. It was enough to satisfy the lender's requirements for an initial \$125,000 loan, and the first 10 acres was purchased, with an option to buy 10 more.

In September 1968, the Raleigh Racquet Club opened for business.

Today, the club has 350 full-time members, six hard courts



Members of Raleigh Racquet Club play in the bubble that was built last year

PHOTO BY SUSAN LONDON

and 19 clay courts. Last Saturday, the club celebrated its 40th anniversary as 200 members and guests turned out to eat, drink and dance — and, of course, watch and play tennis.

The club started with six courts and a pro shop. A pool and swim house followed in June 1969.

The timing for the club's opening was good. In the late 1960s, the popularity of tennis was exploding in the United States.

The Raleigh Racquet Club was in the position to be "on the cutting edge of helping to open up men's professional tennis," said Happer.

The club staged the Southern Championships from 1972 — 1977, and the American Express of Raleigh Tournaments in 1978 and 1979.

Over the years, John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, Matt Wilander

and Monica Seles, participated in exhibition matches at the club.

Raleigh's growth has in some ways proven a challenge for the club. Where there were too few courts throughout Raleigh in 1968, there are too many now.

As more subdivisions offer tennis facilities, the board has had to find ways to offer potential members something extra, according to former board Member Palmer Sugg.

"You can build all the courts you want, but if there's no program, you don't have anything," added Happer, who moved from Raleigh in 1981 and now resides in Florida.

Today, a temporary bubble encloses six outdoor courts from October to April. It's the only one of its kind in North Carolina, according to Suze Lippard, vice president of the club's board.

Funds from several assessments have been used to convert some of the clay courts to hard court material and build the bubble structure. Annual dues increased, and 10 acres fronting Falls of Neuse Road is for sale in an effort to decrease debt and upgrade the pool and clubhouse.

Among the club's programs are tennis classes for youth aged 4 to 18. Former N.C. State men's tennis coach J.W. Isenhour began the program, whose alumni include Andrew Simpson, a coach at Wake Forest University.

Those attending the celebration last week were encouraged to bring tennis balls to donate to the Raleigh Parks and Recreation Department — to further the game of tennis, organizers said.

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