



## *The Harold Solomon Story for the 62nd Induction Banquet Program*

*The 62nd induction banquet was held on November 9, 2023. Story written by Chris Zang.*

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Tennis players often practice groundstrokes by hitting against a wall. The reason is simple: The wall doesn't miss. Opponents of Harold Solomon in the 1970s and '80s shared that sentiment. He usually wouldn't miss, earning the nickname "The Human Backboard."

"I was only 5-6 and I weighed like 130 pounds, so it's really hard to put the ball away against bigger, stronger guys. But I could outlast them," says Solomon, 71, a Washington, D.C., native who grew up in Silver Spring, Md. "My dad said, 'You've got to figure out a way to be in the best shape of anybody and be able to stay out there all day if necessary.'"

So, the two of them would do drills when Harold was 12 or 13 where they would hit a thousand balls in a row without missing. "If you missed before a thousand, you'd have to start all over again," Solomon recalls. "It made me really work on my footwork and my focus."

The hard work continued in college, where Solomon was No. 1 at Rice University. "If the players were out there practicing for two hours, I'd practice for four. If they were going to the gym for an hour, I'd go for an hour and a half." Not that he worked *all* the time. He also met his wife of 45 years at Rice; Jan was No. 1 on the women's tennis team. They have two children and three grandkids.

Solomon turned pro after his sophomore year in 1972. His marathon style resulted in the first of his 22 singles titles at the 1974 *Washington Star* tournament. The final against Guillermo Vilas featured one rally of 105 consecutive shots. "One article said someone ran out and got a Coke and a hot dog and came back, and we were still playing the same point," Solomon recalls with a laugh. "It became a psychological thing, players dreading facing me. They'd say you needed to bring your lunch when you play Harold Solomon. I encouraged that stuff. It gave me an edge."

Enough so that Solomon rose to No. 5 in the world in singles, spending four years in the top 10. Playing with doubles partner Eddie Dibbs. "The Bagel Twins" reached No. 4 in the world in 1976. Solomon was on four United States Davis Cup teams, was a U.S. Open semifinalist in 1977 and reached the French Open final in 1976.

"I thought I'd win it a couple times," Solomon says. "Unfortunately, this guy Björn Borg came along, and I lost to him in the semifinals twice."

Paris was a far cry from when he first picked up a racquet at age 5 and soon fell in love with tennis. He won his first tournament at age 8 in Takoma Park, Md. By 13 he lost in the national 14-and-under finals.

One of his friends then, and now, was Steve Krulevitz, whose 2019 induction into the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame (MDSAHOF) Solomon attended. “Harold is one of the great overachievers in the history of tennis,” says Krulevitz, who ranks him only behind Arthur Ashe among Mid-Atlantic players. “His return of serve was one of the best in his era and he used the moonball to break up a player’s rhythm.”

After the two squared off in many local youth tournaments, Solomon at age 14 moved to Florida for part of the year. Today Solomon admits the move enhanced his tennis game but disrupted his social life.

“We would go to school [Springbrook High] in Maryland from September through early December, and then we'd go down to Florida from December through April. We'd come back up to Maryland from April through June.”

Florida allowed Solomon to play year-round, and his game soared, becoming the first to win the national Orange Bowl 18-and-under junior championships twice. His tennis dreams were coming true.

“When I was 14, I told my father, ‘I’m going to be in the top 10.’ He thought I was crazy. The odds against me were astronomical ... because of my size, and I wasn’t as gifted, athletically.”

Toward the end of his career, Solomon became involved in the game’s administrative side, serving as the Association of Tennis Professionals president (1979-1981) and then on the boards of both the men’s and women’s tennis tours. “I was fighting hard for equal prize money and women's rights while representing the men too, which was not a popular position at the time. But it was something I felt was really important, to make a difference and be involved in other things.”

Since 1978 those other things have included The Hunger Project, a global organization he and his wife support and advocate for. The Hunger Project focuses on empowering women’s leadership in ending hunger and mobilizing people to end their own hunger, thereby increasing their self-sufficiency.

He’s also stayed in touch with tennis. For 15 years he coached rising stars such as Mary Joe Fernandez, Monica Seles, Jennifer Capriati, and Jim Courier. When the travel became too much, he opened the Harold Solomon Tennis Institute in 2005 near his home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

“We tried not to make it a factory. We never had more than two players on a court at a time,” says Solomon, who operated the institute for 13 years. Now he works with several high school and college players, with special attention for his 12-year-old grandson, who likes the game. “No pressure,” Solomon says with a smile.

His family will be proud tonight as Solomon receives what Krulevitz calls “overdue recognition” from the MDSAHOF. “At these events you always think about the people responsible for helping you achieve the things you achieved,” says Solomon, a member of the USTA Mid-Atlantic, Intercollegiate Tennis, and D.C. Sports halls of fame. “The first thought goes to my parents. My father spent a ton of time and effort with me, and my mom, for taking me and my three siblings to tournaments. It was a lot. My coaches, friends, my wife. There was a lot of support.”