



Figures. A young Dr. Woodard (second from the right) with fellow members of the Greater Grambling Tennis Association after a junior tournament (1). Dr. Woodard (second from the right) at a reunion of members of the Grambling High School tennis team (2). Dr. Woodard with his wife, Melanie, and children, Nadia and Kellan, at an Atlanta Braves playoff game (3). Dr. Woodard with his children at a tennis court (4). Dr. Woodard playing in a recent tennis match (5).

FROM TENNIS LESSONS TO LIFE LESSONS



The lessons I learned from playing tennis in my youth have played an important role in the course of my life.

BY LAWRENCE WOODARD, MD

I grew up in Grambling, Louisiana—a small college town located in the north of the state. It is the home of Grambling State University, a historically Black college where both of my parents were professors. When I was 9 years old, my dad convinced three of my neighborhood friends and me to learn how to play tennis. He wanted to introduce us to something different from what we'd already experienced.

Like most of the other kids in town, we'd only ever played basketball, baseball, and football. We didn't have

any interest in tennis, but he enticed us with promises of candy after each lesson. We started hitting the courts every Saturday. Before we knew it, we looked forward to our tennis lessons and didn't even want the candy afterward. More of my friends started joining us. Eventually, about 20 kids took tennis lessons every Saturday, and most of us fell in love with the sport.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

With so many kids interested in tennis, my dad took it to the next

level. Together with my mom and a couple of other parents, he founded the Greater Grambling Tennis Association (Figures 1 and 2). The group was unique because Grambling was a majority Black town, so we were all African American kids playing a sport that few African Americans played in the 1970s and early 1980s. As the Greater Grambling Tennis Association grew, we learned about the United States Tennis Association tournaments held throughout Louisiana and entered some of them.

We had been practicing, but we didn't know anything about these individual tournaments. We were therefore amazed at how well we did in our first one. It fueled a fire in all of us to commit to the sport and put all our effort into it. Several of us, including me, ranked in the top 10 players in Louisiana throughout our junior careers.

Six of us decided that we wanted to play tennis competitively on the same team in high school. The high school we attended had no tennis team, so we started one. Our first year, we were eighth and ninth graders and lost only one regular-season match. In each subsequent year, we were undefeated in regular-season matches. As the only African American players and team competing in the state championship tournament, we made it to the state championship finals in 4 of the 5 years we competed.

We each received scholarship offers to play Division 1 tennis in college, and two of us went on to play in college. The rest of us also received academic scholarship offers and opted for them instead. We were proud that we were not only accomplished tennis players but also excellent students, thanks to the emphasis each of our parents placed on education.

TENNIS LESSONS BECOME LIFE LESSONS

Today, the six of us are all successful professionals. Of course, I'm a physician. The others became an actuary scientist, a CEO, a lawyer, an orthodontist, and a businessman/tennis teaching pro. We all feel that the lessons we learned in tennis are major reasons for our success.

Tennis is unlike any other sport. Growing up, most of our schoolmates played sports for a season—football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring. You can't do that with tennis because it is such a challenging sport. You play year-round if you want to play well. In this way, tennis taught me the value of

commitment and dedication—two characteristics required of anyone who practices medicine. You must be dedicated to the field of medicine every day, week, and month of every year.

Another unique aspect of tennis is the scoring system. In most sports, a running tally of points is kept throughout the game. At the end of the game, the side with the most points is the winner. In tennis, there are multiple games and multiple sets within one match. You can score fewer points and lose one game but still win the next game and the set. You can lose the first set in a match but still win the overall contest by winning the following two sets.

Tennis taught me not to dwell on the past but to look ahead in all my endeavors. This lesson is especially useful to me as a cataract surgeon. I treat every surgery individually. I don't dwell on what happened in a previous operation. Instead, I must put all of my effort and energy into each surgery.

SHAPING MY SPINE AND A CAREER IN MEDICINE

When I was a freshman in high school, I was diagnosed with scoliosis. It became clear to me soon after that I wouldn't be able to pursue a long career in tennis owing to the condition. Luckily, I was already interested in pursuing a career in medicine. As I met with my orthopedic surgeon over the next few years, it also became apparent that I might need surgery after high school. My interactions with him stimulated my interest in becoming a surgeon, but I wasn't sure that orthopedics was the right specialty for me.

When the professor of a histology course I took in college gave each student a big project to do at the end of the semester and assigned me the eye, I became intrigued by its intricacy. That's when my interest in ophthalmology began.

I underwent surgery for scoliosis when I was a sophomore in college. Two implanted rods have kept my

spine straight to this day. I couldn't play sports for a few years after surgery, and my interest in tennis waned.

A FAMILY TRADITION

Today, I'm married and have two children (Figure 3). When my daughter expressed an interest in tennis, I started teaching the sport to her, roughly 30 years after I'd last played. In doing so, I realized how much I missed and loved the sport. All of the lessons I learned from tennis started coming back to me, and I realized I wanted to pass them on to my daughter.

My wife and younger son also developed an interest in tennis. It became a family sport in which we all began competing (Figure 4). I started practicing a lot and was surprised to find that I played better than I expected, although not at the level I played in high school. I started competing in team tennis again in Atlanta, where I live, and across the state of Georgia (Figure 5). My wife and both of my kids began competing here, too. Each of us has played on teams that were Atlanta City Champions and Georgia State Champions in team tennis.

Tennis has become a sport that we all enjoy, and it teaches my kids many life lessons. As I did, my daughter loves competing for her school. In eighth grade, she won the Fulton County Middle School Singles Championship, and her team won the Team Championship. She is currently playing on her varsity high school team. They are division and regional champions, and they are currently competing in the State Championship tournament. It's been nice to relive my tennis years and see her enjoy a lot of the same success with the sport as I had when I was her age. ■

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