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Dickson took the time to create new academy

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SARASOTA

Mark Dickson had a reputation that was close to legendary for taking his time.

Players on the other side of the net would wait, impatiently, as Dickson would give a tug of the hat and began to bounce the tennis ball.

One. Two. Three.

Not yet. Four. Five. Six.

The maddening count would continue.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

Not until Dickson was certain he was completely prepared would the tall, lanky, right-hander finally toss the ball skyward and crack his booming serve.

So, it shouldn't be surprising that Dickson would take his time before finally launching the tennis academy that bears his name.

Almost two decades after injuries ended his playing career and only after due diligence did Dickson decide to take the leap into starting an academy.

"I wanted to make certain I had researched everything. I wanted to do it right," Dickson said about the Mark Dickson Tennis Academy that the former touring pro has launched in Sarasota.



Dickson

Now that he is ready, Dickson has opened an academy that will be based at two public facilities -- Payne Park near downtown Sarasota and Potter Park near the Evalyn Sadlier Jones branch YMCA. This beginning took time to arrive.

"It really took a long time to get everything in place," said Dickson, who, approaching the age of 50, is entering another phase in a game he has been around his entire life.

To reach this point, Dickson spent more than a year traveling around the state and the country researching and visiting tennis academies to find out what works and what he felt was important in building his own program.

He talked to parents of players to learn some of the pitfalls from their perspective. He conferred with tennis academy directors to learn of some of the difficulties they experienced. He asked questions, and listened to answers.

"I learned a tremendous amount," Dickson said. "I am ready to take the knowledge and experience I have and I want to be able to pass it along."

With academies popping up all over the area, it is important to have a message. And there is a lot that Dickson can draw from to impart to young players.

This was a guy who beat Ivan Lendl, when Lendl was No. 1. He beat Guillermo Vilas on clay, when Vilas was the king of clay. He has wins over Yannick Noah, Jimmy Arias and Andres Gomez.

He reached the quarterfinals at the U.S. Open in singles and doubles, won 10 titles and at the end of one year was among the top dozen prize money winners.

Dickson, who grew up in Tampa and has lived in Sarasota for 26 years, was also one of the nicest guys on the tour, winning several sportsmanship awards in a career that was cut short by knee and shoulder injuries.

A top junior player, Dickson went on to star at Clemson, where he was team captain and is now a member of the school's Hall of Fame.

As a pro, Dickson was regarded as one of the hardest workers and known for an ability to win on any surface. He did it behind a solid game, a big, deceptive serve, and mental conditioning that gave him an edge when the game was on the line.

Those are some of the qualities that Dickson plans to emphasize in the various programs his academy will offer young players of varying levels.

"We have programs that cater from the beginner to those approaching world class status," Dickson explains.

Dickson is not satisfied with simply teaching strokes and technique. He believes

that to win tennis matches, a player needs more than just repetition and hours on the court.

"Players are giving away matches. They are cheating themselves by not giving their best effort mentally and emotionally on the court," Dickson contends.

During his career, Dickson took the talent he had and made the most of it by being prepared and being ready to take advantage of any weakness his opponent exhibited. While it seemed he killed with kindness, he also had an aggressive game. Those who underestimated his competitiveness usually paid for that mistake.

Among the lessons that Dickson hopes to pass along is how to play smarter, not just longer. The lessons are designed to build not only tennis players, but also character.

"It is a continual process," Dickson says. "We are talking about leadership, sportsmanship."

The teachings are drawn from lessons he learned from his father, Larry, who played No. 1 on the Florida State University tennis team, was a member of the first FSU varsity basketball team and was the men's tennis coach at the University of Tampa.

Family has always been important to Mark Dickson. While his children, Kristi and Kevin were growing up, Dickson was never far from home. He turned down several tennis opportunities to make sure he was around for his family. Today he is joined in running the academy by his wife, Karen.

They put a premium on training children to be good sports.

"That was important to me," Dickson says. "Family, respect and sportsmanship are going to be major components of our academy. We are a little bit different."

Known for his enthusiasm and positive outlook, Dickson was tested during the darkest times when pain wracked his body and tested his mind.

Not even career-ending injuries and surgeries could compare with what Dickson went through after contracting chicken pox. The 105-degree temperature and a week stay in the hospital was just the beginning of the nightmare that lasted for years and included complications from a lesion on his brain stem.

Finally healthy, Dickson can't get enough of his new venture.

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