

## *What's Up With ... Mark Platt*

*In anticipation of the 2024 opening of the new St. Louis Tennis Hall of Fame at the Armory, 2016 inductee Ron Cobb will be writing regular "What's Up With" features on Hall of Fame members and updates about the Hall of Fame.*

Was it good fortune or misfortune that Mark Platt's career at JC Penney never came to fruition? That's for him to decide.

He was a University City High School alum with a degree in urban studies from Washington University. His goal was to become a real estate, store and facility planner. As a management trainee, he was offered a job with JC Penney in New York City. He was 21 and it was his dream job.

But it was 1980 and the economy suffered a downturn. A month after the offer came, it was rescinded.

"I would have had to wait two years to get the job in Manhattan," Mark said. "It broke my heart. It would have been a perfect fit for me because I was a conceptual guy. I understood research and I had retail experience. Penney will probably go out of business, and they might not if I was there."

Mark decided he'd never let something like that happen to him again. He'd go into business for himself. He knew tennis, having been a solid player in high school and at WashU.

Four years later, back in his hometown, he launched Beginner's World Tennis. After thousands of Friday night tennis parties, clinics, leagues and lessons, plus the tens of thousands of players who he introduced to the game, and 56 couples who met at Beginner's World and got married, he is still going strong.

But, at age 68, he'd like to slow down.



"When I hit 70, I'll cut back," he said. "It's hard for me to drive to Wentzville, bags on my back, go in there and teach a few hours and drive all the way back ... I like it, but it's too hard. South County, the satellite programs, they're good and they create a lot of interest, and I've gotten a lot of players who never would have played, but it's physically too hard."

A health scare in December 2021 nearly forced Mark into early retirement, or worse. He was feeling pain and went to Urgent Care, fearing he had a blood clot. The doctor found no swelling, no discoloration, and told him he had a pinched nerve.

"Stupid me, I was relieved, and 12 days later I almost died. I was at home, couldn't breathe. If I stood up, I passed out," he said. It turned out to be an embolism. "We went to Mercy for eight hours and they got it resolved. I was very, very close to not living anymore."

The episode changed Mark's perspective, reminding him that "we don't know how long we have." He brought a new urgency to his work.

Mark's work from day one has always been to bring new people into tennis.

"I found a niche with the beginners," he said. "No one wanted them. Now everybody wants them. So I came up with Beginner's World Tennis."

Mark rolled out ideas like they were off an assembly line. Always with the ideas. Some worked, others didn't. Among his newest is a color-coded rating system called Galaxy Tennis Rating. He just applied for a trademark. Instead of rising from one number to the next, Mark's students gain a new color, like karate students earn a different-colored belt. Mark believed that there were too many number-coded rating systems, and that Galaxy clears up the confusion.



He invented Fun Tennis 44, a series of games such as one in which players hit a foam ball with tennis strokes on a 44-foot pickleball court. He has a lot of other short games that he created to compete with pickleball.

"Tennis has sort of laid down, like 'we give up.' It's stupid," he said. "I do all the research and went over 30 tennis-related racket kinds of game and I chose the one that had the same tennis construct. I'm a tennis teacher. I don't want racquetball because it's high to low. That's a disaster.

"I don't want badminton because it's sort of 'up.' I want the tennis strokes."

He got another idea one day on a visit to the Jewish Community Center. He saw that nearly all the racquetball courts were empty during weekdays from 9 to 5. So he wants to retro-fit courts, draw some lines and create a game based on a Spanish game called padel, which Mark says is the fastest-growing sport in the world and more popular in Spain than tennis.

Another project is to open a practice facility in a gym, a place for people to learn and play. There

was a time when Mark wanted to own his own tennis club. He says he came close, but it never happened.

To accelerate the creation and roll-out of his programs, Mark enlisted the help of Juan Soto, a computer-savvy student at Maryville University with whom he meets on Wednesdays. Mark said Juan solved problems in two hours that would have taken him two weeks.



“My plan now is to operationalize my ideas and bring them to life,” Mark said, “so they’re not just ideas on a shelf, or half-ideas that aren’t completed. I’m in the business now of completing projects.”

Mark has always operated on the fringe of established tennis instruction. He’s regarded in some circles as a maverick.

“Absolutely, even now after all I’ve done,” he said. “Because my ideas are different. I think better. The proof is in the numbers. I think I did 20,000 kids in one year.”

Beginner’s World Tennis proved to be a good substitute for JC Penney.

“I think I’ve done a good job,” he said. “I think I made a difference with a lot of people. It was a good fit for me.”

It’s not as if Mark hasn’t been recognized for what he’s done. His list of honors and awards is a long one. They include the USTA Eva Kraft Community Service award, a World Team Tennis National Director of the Year, Tennis Magazine Top 5 Tennis Teachers in the USA, plus three halls of fame.



*Mark Platt was inducted into the St. Louis Tennis Hall of Fame in 2019.*