

# My Unlikely Journey to a Varsity Letter

## Stephen Coester

I began playing tennis when I was thirteen and got good enough to make my high school team. Kirkwood (MO) High was a tennis powerhouse and during my junior and senior years we compiled thirty-five wins and just one loss. I wasn't a star player just holding down the number three or four spot.

Still I figured I was good enough to play at USNA. But during plebe summer I signed up for boxing instead of tennis because I liked all those sit ups while pounding on my stomach. I figured I could go out for tennis in the Spring. I soon found out that boxing wasn't for me because my hand speed was nonexistent and I tended to get hit a lot.

So after a few weeks and a broken nose I quit boxing and headed out to the tennis courts. The plebe coach told me to go away because they had already chosen the plebe team. This was still during plebe summer for gosh sake. I finally convinced the coach to let me try out with the condition that I had to start at the bottom challenging each person above me. Eventually I made it up to the number five position which meant I made the starting team of six singles lines plus three doubles lines. I earned my plebe letter.



Youngster year I went out for varsity not expecting to make the team even though I had matured and improved a lot plebe year. One day we showed up for practice and Coach Bos said "#1 play #13 and loser turn in your gear. He went through all the other combinations with me at #10 having to play the #3 firstie, a tall studly looking mid with a big game. To everyone's surprise I defeated him in three sets and certainly to his surprise he was cut from the team.

During the spring season I wasn't on the first string and never played a match.

Second class year I was looking forward to a great year. I was playing #5 singles and played about the first eight matches of the season. Suddenly I had a freak accident to my right wrist and had to try to play heavily bandaged. Didn't play any more matches and failed to letter by a match or two.

First class year Coach Potter who was brand new called me into his office and said he didn't want any non-lettered firsties on the team. I explained about the injury that kept me from lettering and finally he agreed that like plebe year I could start on the bottom and challenge my way up. If I made the starting team he'd keep me. This was during the Fall season.

At that time Lee Pekary and Corky Graham ('64) who were #1 and #2 were starring on the squash team so as I challenged my way up the ladder I finally reached #1. They had a set of blue and gold name boards by the varsity courts and it felt good to see my name at the top even though I knew Pekary and Graham would have been there. Impressed my OAO, future wife Yvonne.

During the Spring season Coach Potter played me at number five or six singles and number three doubles with our #1 player, Lee Pekary. With Lee to carry me I don't think we ever lost at doubles. I won about two-thirds of my singles matches. In 1963 we lost to Army 5-4 after our number three player sprained his ankle and had to retire. I managed to win both my singles and doubles. so at least I had done my part.



Overall in my non-glorious career at Navy I had 29 wins and twelve losses. And significant to me I finally earned my varsity N.



First Row (left to right): James M. Beall; R. Reid Badger; Robert R. Teall; Steven H. Coester; R. Lee Pekary; John C. Owens. Second Row (left to right): Harvey Mueller; Coach Art Potter; Norman M. Radtke; Clark Graham; R. Geoffrey Kirkland; John A. Nelson; John R. Lindahl; James R. Kuneman; Captain John E. Madden, (SC) USN.

I guess all this shows that determination counts for a lot. I'm a mediocre athlete but it meant more to me to prove myself athletically than to earn academic honors, which came more easily to me.

Tennis came in handy while on cruise. During aviation summer I was invited to play tennis with the admiral at Pensacola and first class year Lanny Cox and I played with the admiral on the USS Randolph against the mayor of Valencia, Spain. Nothing like patting the admiral on the butt with your racket and saying, "Nice shot, sir. The Admiral was thrilled that we won the match and invited Lanny and me to a party for the mayor. We considered that an order and showed up in our dress uniforms. The Flag Lt took one look that these two mids and told us to go away. I suggested he talk to the admiral and he disappeared. Shortly thereafter who arrives at the door with drink in hand but the Admiral. He put his arm around my shoulder and introduced me to all the bigwigs as his tennis partner!

By the way, I'm still playing at age seventy-three. I have two leagues and play four or five times a week. Because of my severe arthritis I quit at age thirty-five for twenty-eight years, but picked up the game again at age sixty-two when my grandson started playing. Thank goodness for lightweight modern rackets.

