

2008 Tennis Industry Hall of Fame

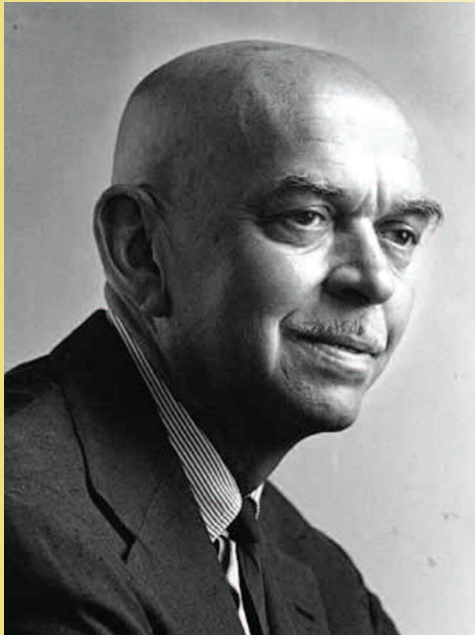
There are many people whose dedication and passion have helped the sport of tennis thrive throughout the years. And now, as we introduce the new Tennis Industry Hall of Fame, we honor those who have made—and continue to make—tennis better for all of us.

Howard Head

The “patron saint of average athletes” has helped millions enjoy tennis.

It's hard to imagine what the sport of tennis would be like today if the late Howard Head—a passionate yet mediocre player at best—hadn't decided, for the second time in his career, that it was the equipment that was holding him back from improving.

By any measure, Head was a true visionary. And remarkably, he revolutionized two industries—skiing, then tennis. In the process, the so-called “patron saint of average athletes” allowed millions of people around the world to pick up and enjoy sports like they were never able to do before.



In 1947, after Head's first skiing misadventure, the aircraft engineer blamed his wood skis, so he put his efforts—and his winnings from playing poker—into designing a new type of ski that combined metal, plastic and plywood and was more durable, lighter, and easier to turn. His Head Standard ski made it possible for almost anyone to enjoy the sport.

The Head Ski Co.

later became Head Sports and diversified into tennis in 1968. Head developed a metal tennis racquet that he introduced at the US Open in 1969. Soon after, he sold his interest in the company to AMF. But tennis remained a passion of his, and after this first “retirement,” Head bought a ball machine to practice with.

“At the time, Prince Manufacturing made only ball machines,” says Dave Haggerty, who started his career at Prince in 1980 and is now president of the Tennis Industry Association and president and CEO of Head USA Inc. “About a week later Howard called the president of Prince and said he's got problems with the ball machine, that it's not really well-engineered. Howard told him everything he needs to do to fix the machine. Prince didn't have that kind of money, so Howard decided to invest in the company.” Head bought a controlling share in Prince and became chairman in 1971.

But still frustrated by his poor play on court, Head turned his attention to the racquet itself. He developed a metal racquet for Prince using an aluminum alloy that allowed for a bigger, lighter and easier-to-use frame. The hitting area was 20 percent larger than conventional racquets at the time, enlarging the sweetspot of the frame. Amateurs and pros took up the racquet, and in less than four years, more than 700,000 players were using it.

Head patented his innovative “Prince Advantage” line of racquets in 1976, covering racquets with a head size of 95 to 135 square inches. Later, he was instrumental in the development of the Prince Graphite frame. “Like many eccentric people, Howard had a vision,” says Haggerty. “He was always brainstorming.” Prince was sold to Chesebrough-Pond's in 1982, and Head retired for the second time.

“Howard was one of those guys for whom failure was never an option,” says Ray Benton, a close friend. “If he had a loss, it was a great learning experience.”

Born in Philadelphia in 1914, Head graduated from Harvard in 1936 with a degree in engineering. From 1939 to 1947, he worked for the Glenn L. Martin aviation company, until leaving in 1948 to found the Head Ski Co.

“Many people said Howard changed through the years and became much softer and easier to get along with and not quite as frantic,” says Martha “Marty” Head, who married Howard in 1984. “I don't know if that's quite true. Even though he was older than me, I could hardly keep up with him. He was a lot of fun.”

Outside of tennis and skiing, Head was particularly drawn to philanthropic endeavors, says Martha. He was instrumental in starting CenterStage, the premier repertory theater in Baltimore. And he created the Howard Head Sports Medicine Centers, now with nine locations operating in conjunction with the Vail Valley (Colo.) Medical Center health care system.

Although Head died in 1991, his influence in the sports he touched remains huge. Both Head/Penn and Prince Sports have been among the most influential companies in tennis for decades. And while the products he developed have been important in shaping the tennis landscape, through Head's companies and his vision, he launched and influenced the careers of many of today's leaders in this industry.

He may have been a mediocre player on the court, but Howard Head's impact in this industry has been anything but average. ●