

Bill O'Brien's Acceptance Speech

I think Alan said everything I was going to say. I just want to say a few words, but I don't think I'm capable of that. I also want to start off where Alan left off and that is to acknowledge my wonderful wife, Betsy, of 56 plus years. Throughout our whole life together, Betsy has been an immense contribution to me, providing me space, encouragement, and counsel for everything that I've done in life. You are a very giving soul and I love you very much.

My life in platform tennis started the same way as so many of you in this room. I had just moved to northern New Jersey and a neighbor called and said, "Wear a pair of tennis shoes and I'm going to pick you up on Saturday and show you a game you've never seen before." We went over to Indian Trail Club in Franklin Lakes and joined two other guys. We were hitting the ball around for a while and of course, you can't do that for very long before you want to start playing a game. At about four points into the game, my neighbor drilled one with a hard forehand right into my chest. And then he laughed. I was hooked right then and there. And I've been hooked all the rest of my life. This is such a wonderful game.

But part of the point of that is that each of us in this room, if we would do that same sort of thing starting next season, bring somebody in and stick with them until they get the bug, can you imagine the growth that would come into the game as a result of that? I won't challenge you to do that, because many of you already do that, but it is just a suggestion.

I played the North Jersey league for three years and then we moved to Hinsdale, as Alan mentioned, but there were no courts in Hinsdale. Six years later, two courts showed up. I saw them in a park and I said, "I know what to do with these things." But I didn't know people that I could bring into the game because I'd been sailing all my life. That's what my summers are, so I didn't know any tennis players. I found a guy who was a strong tennis player coming off the court one day. I said, "If you give me the names of other players that you know, I'll cold call them and get them out and teach them how to play and get them hooked." I started the first team in 1991. They got hooked enough to be willing to play in the league and the Chicago league was generous enough to let us in. We had to play all of our matches on the road. We couldn't host any but that turned out to have a silver lining to it, in that because we all carpoled together, we formed friendships that were so strong and continue on to this day. That was a big part of what provided strength to the Hinsdale program. At the end of the first year, I found a guy who captained that same group of guys the subsequent year. So, I started a new group again, and I taught them throughout the whole season, and captained their team and at the end of the season, I found somebody who would captain them again. I started a new group of beginners every year for the last 31 years.

As Alan said, what started out as just two courts in a public park—by the way, they were donated by Connie and Dennis Keller, who were long-time members residents of Hinsdale and they thought that was a game that ought to come to Hinsdale. We are so lucky that they did, what a great contribution to us. So, what started as two courts in a public park on the outer edge of the Chicago league is now a sub-league of 13 clubs and 58 courts and some 123 men's teams, and now it's up around 1,500 guys and way more than 600 women. It's been a successful program. This sort of thing was also happening in Chicago to some extent. There was a growth that Alan was talking about.

I want to make a pitch for the importance of public facilities in everybody's league. You don't often find a country club member leaving his/her country club and starting a program at another country club, for understandable reasons. That's where growth comes from, from the public side. People start playing in a park district and they happen to belong to another club that doesn't have a paddle facility. Once you get enough guys or women from that club within the Park District program, then they'll start programming at the club. In the Southwest suburbs, we have had a new country club enter the Southwest league with a four-court facility right from the get-go every year for the last eight years. That appears to be continuing for the next five or six years at least. That comes from people coming out of the three Park District programs in the Southwest who are bringing those things into being. Enough of that pitch but you can see I have a little passion for that.

Getting associated with Alan. I was doing this captaining and starting the new guys. A guy from Indian Hill Club who had been a commissioner in the league was getting tired of it and he was looking for somebody else. He talked me into doing that. It's kind of like being a godfather for a given sub-league. A couple of years later, Alan Graham took over the Chicago league, and a year or so after that Alan called me out of the blue and said, "I'd like you to run the Intermediate tournament." I said, "No, no, no, you don't want me to do that. I sail all summer, I never play tennis. I'm absolutely clueless." He said that he'd talk me through it. About four weeks later, I got a call out of the blue from Alan. He said, "Have you ordered the favors yet?" I said, "What's a favor?" He said, "You call David Kjeldsen from Viking and tell him you want some mock turtleneck shirts and then you give them away the tournament." About four weeks later, he called and said, "Have you got your entry form put together yet?" I said, "What the hell does that look like?" So that was the process that Alan would put you through. He's a sneaky son of a bitch. He draws you into doing things that you had no idea you were going to do or even able to do. Some years later I started to work with Alan in the annual reorganization of the teams in the men's league. We have a whole bunch of teams and we break them down into leagues. It's quite a process. We come up with what we think makes sense, send it out to the 50 clubs, and then they send it back and say we want our teams here and there and so forth. We're up to 480 teams and putting all those together in sub-leagues where everybody's happy with their placement—well, we never run the risk of being under-advised.

All in all, it's been an absolute joy working with Alan Graham. He is a great guy, a class guy so dedicated to the Chicago league and to its players. We owe him a great debt of gratitude

One other thing, I'd like to talk about and that is the level of volunteerism that occurs in our sport. It's really a marvelous thing. We play in our leagues and we enjoy that and many times we don't realize all the stuff that lies behind it. The APTA has been an incredible organization over the years. Besides being the governing body of the sport, maintaining the rules, and all that kind of thing, they've done so many things to grow the game, to make it more exciting for us regular players through things like Live Streaming, a magazine that's online now, used to be a paper thing. This has been a tremendous evolution over time.

When I first started playing in 1978, I think David Ohlmuller's mother used to keep the whole membership of the APTA on a bunch of three-by-five cards in a shoe box. Now we have 32,000 members, so there was just an evolution over time enabled by evolution in technology so that we could do more and more things. Nonetheless, it is the people who have put big parts of their lives into volunteerism, all of our various APTA Presidents that was just a huge job: John Horine, Mark

Fischl, Tim McAvoy, Rob Coster, Scott Bondurant, and now Tiernan Cavanna have devoted a chunk of their life to making this whole thing successful. In addition to that, there were people who were working with these technologies bringing things forward: Paul Wiggins dragged us into having a website. Walter Fyk and Anne Fyk and Isabel Cabanne kept refining the technology over and over until now all the players enter their own scores during a tournament and it makes it much better for tournament directors. It used to drive me nuts not knowing who won what match. Gerri Viant created live streaming—not the technology part but our ability to use that technology to provide you with all these great videos and live and archived videos and matches. Whenever I'm in the paddle hut in Hinsdale, I turn off the basketball games and put on a paddle tournament. What the hell are we doing watching basketball? Gerri pioneered along with Mark Fischl announcing at these tournaments. You know at the Chicago level, obviously, you have all kinds of people make this league work. At the local clubs, there are people who donate their time to make it work. This thing that we enjoy playing is a result of an immense amount of volunteerism and that's part of what makes this game so wonderful.

I'll wrap up by saying this wonderful game is absolutely the most fun you can have with your clothes on in the wintertime. We are really lucky someone invented this thing. Thank you so much for sharing this incredible honor with me. I'm absolutely overwhelmed and I'm thrilled that you're all here. Thank you so much!