

## LEGENDS SERIES: RANDALL KING – MY TENNIS JOURNEY



Randall King never set his sights explicitly on professional tennis. A four-time US Chinese National champion, his journey began from his hometown of Portland, Oregon, before he ventured throughout the Pacific Northwest, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, globetrotting on tour, then Taiwan, and ultimately landed in Hong Kong, a place where he has called home since joining Citibank here in 1980. His game found a new lease of life and immediately became an ever-present force on the local tennis scene, winning seven singles and nine doubles titles in local majors during a 6-year span. He made his presence felt immediately the first time he played Davis Cup for Hong Kong, when he helped steer a young local contingent, whose starters were barely out of high school, to its maiden victory in 1984. This is his story.

Born on April 2, 1950, King grew up at a time when the undercurrent of the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) was still prevalent in the States. It was a federal law passed in 1882 that prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers in the aftermath of the great influx caused by the Gold Rush. It was then subsequently extended several times before it was finally repealed in 1943. Although he did not experience this manner of push-back on a personal level, his early tennis years did not begin at the swanky country clubs, but instead at the public park tennis courts where he was a tag-along with his father to his regular get-togethers and he started to play the game against kids brought by other parents.

**"MY DAD INTRODUCED ME TO TENNIS. A SECOND-HAND DON BUDGE WOOD RACQUET, WHICH WAS TOO HEAVY. SO I PLAYED TWO-HANDED BOTH SIDES."**

Perhaps it was his knack for the game or maybe his father saw something in him that could be unlocked with proper coaching, King was introduced to coach Ed Leonard, a former American football player, who started giving lessons to the boy full-time when he was 14. Leonard passed on to him the fundamental concepts of defense and offense, and the importance of drills and preparation.

*"My tennis coach Ed Leonard was a former offensive guard for the Detroit Lions. He taught me the concept of intense defense, which was what all professional athletes practice and execute. When I refer to intense defense, this means fewest errors, run a high ball count, and not beat yourself."*

Unbeknownst to most, King used to play double-handed off both wings, but his coach convinced him the potential and beauty of an all-court game with a single-hander, so he committed heart and soul with the conversion. To a 14-year-old (same age [Pete Sampras](#) parted ways with his), that was an abrupt change, and during the initial transition period, losses came fast and furious. Perseverance, and the will to overcome that challenge, ultimately carried him over the finish line.

*"In the summer time, there was a Portland junior circuit, a Pacific Northwest circuit, and a US National circuit. This meant more than 15 tournaments, which included singles and doubles, and sometimes two age groups. For example, 14s and 16s or 16s and 18s. So, there was competition, and all this does not include regular high school matches in the Spring."*

**"BEFORE EACH MATCH, I USED TO SPEND A FEW MINUTES VISUALIZING THE FIRST THREE OR FOUR GAMES, TIEBREAKERS, SERVICE, RETURNS OF SERVE, SERVE VOLLEY, APPROACH VOLLEY AND SO ON. MY HEAD (EMOTIONS) TODAY IS STILL MY BIGGEST HURDLE."**

King, who was twice [Oregon Boy's State Singles Champion](#) in 1966 and 1968, won the Pacific Northwest Under-18 Sectionals in 1967 and finished that year ranked No. 1. The kid from Wilson High garnered interests from universities both in-state and nationally. In a handwritten letter dated September 8 that year from Herbert Hedin, Columbia University's Tennis Alumni Committee Chairman: "Now, fine young players like yourself, from all over the country, have begun to apply. The next few years will be exciting for tennis at Columbia. I hope that you will decide to be here with us."

*"The Oregon State High School Championships were held in May after the Portland Interscholastic League (PIL) regular season. By the time high school was out, there were junior tennis tournaments almost weekly. In 1966, you can drive cars in Oregon alone at age 16. At some point, my dad said if I won the State title and finished the year with a 3.5 GPA, then he'll sign the document for my license. I got both!"*

[Dick Gould](#), the winningest coach in NCAA men's tennis history, who, from 1967-2004, guided Stanford to all 17 of its NCAA championships, developed 50 individual All-Americans, including 10 NCAA singles champions, wrote to King in a correspondence dated January 12, 1968: "I think that without question we will have one of the real outstanding teams in the country here next year, and I look forward to having you here at Stanford with us in this endeavor."

With such big name schools, as well as other prominent ones in the Pacific Northwest in pursuit, King decided to take his talents to [Southern California](#) instead and he made the freshman team as a walk-on. It must be noted that since 1946, USC had been the powerhouse in men's college tennis in the US, winning 10 National titles up until 1968. From 1966-69, USC ruled the collegiate scene by winning four consecutive team championships and with players [Bob Lutz](#), [Stan Smith](#), and Mexican No. 1 [Joaquin Loyo-Mayo](#) capturing the NCAA singles title in 1967, 1968, and 1969 respectively. In doubles, Smith and Lutz won the NCAA title in 1967 and 1968, while Loyo-Mayo triumphed with compatriot Marcello Lara in 1969.

Smith, of course, went on to win the [US Open in 1971](#) and [Wimbledon in 1972](#). The partnership he formed with Bob Lutz became one of the most successful men's doubles tandems on the ATP Tour, winning four US and one Australian Open, while reaching the finals of Wimbledon four times and the French twice. The pair made their Davis Cup debut for USA in 1968 when they were just seniors at USC and won four consecutive rubbers that year, including in the [World Group Final](#) against Australia, that clinched the Davis Cup.

*"In those days, SC only had two tennis courts next to the girls dorm and the Quonset hut of a film school, so we did not practice on campus. Instead, we practiced at the Los Angeles Tennis Club where we were admitted as members for a short period. My locker was a few steps from Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. and Charlton Heston. When players like Smith and Lutz got called up for Davis Cup duty, I'd move up in the singles spots. There's a lot going for a scrawny little kid from Portland!"*

After his sophomore year, King transferred to the University of Pennsylvania's [Wharton School of Finance](#). The move, for the most part, was intended to focus squarely on academics, with an awareness that only the very top WCT players could earn a decent living playing tennis. Yet, it turned out to be serendipity, after all, for it was during this time back East that he met his present wife, Christine, a former Diocesan Girls' School student whose family was from Hong Kong. After school in 1971, he worked as a telex operator in an OTC trading house, Greene & Co., at 37

Wall Street, got married, and tennis had no choice but to take a backseat. Then came the [Stock Market Crash of 1973-74](#). Out of tennis and now out of a job, King started coaching to supplement lost income and thoughts of playing competitively again began to resurface. Meanwhile, he became the teaching pro at the Wall Street Racquet Club in New York, the Englewood Field Club in New Jersey and, at one stage, the men's tennis coach at Hunter College in New York City.

He began to find form and started to fall in love with the game again, and buoyed by his win at the US Pro Tennis Association's Eastern Championship, he started to compete on the Tour internationally. The week of November 8, 1976, saw King compete in the territory for the first time when he qualified for the [Hong Kong International Tennis Classic](#), a US\$75,000 Commercial Union Assurance Grand Prix circuit (forerunner to the ATP and WTA Tours) event, before he was eventually ousted by Tim Gullikson in the second round. The tournament, incidentally, went to Aussie great Ken Rosewall, ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the world at the time, who beat No. 1 seed Ilie Nastase, 1-6, 6-4, 7-6, 6-0, in the final.

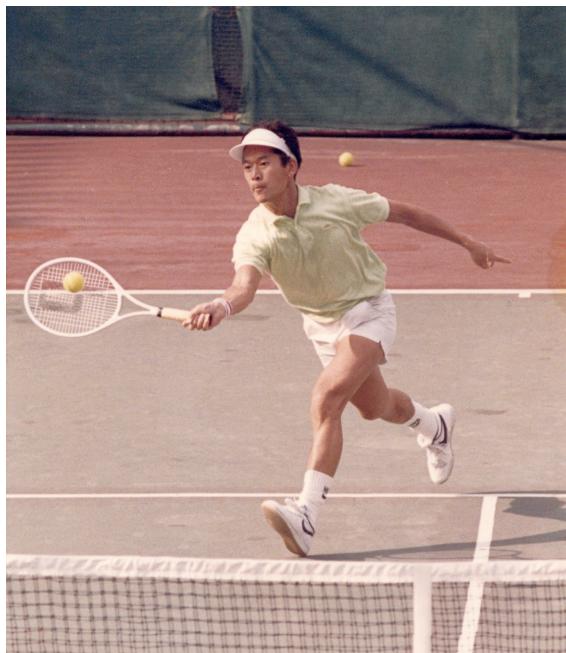
*"I think I had enough points to play Wimbledon and at a minimum play qualifying at Roehampton, but I had not recovered from a bout of malaria I picked up in Hyderabad or Bangalore in December 1976. That was disappointing."*



The following week, he was in the Philippines for the US\$75,000 Manila Open and finished the year at No. 272. The following July, he peaked at No. 269 and later that summer went on to compete in singles qualifying and maindraw doubles at the US Open when the tournament was still held at the [West Side Tennis Club at Forest Hills](#).

By 1978, King was living in Taiwan where he coached at the American Club in Taipei. He then by happenstance caught wind of the Hong Kong Invitational Hardcourt Championships and submitted his entry. The tournament organisers gave him a Direct Acceptance into the maindraw, but as an unseeded floater who had just peaked at ATP No. 269 ten months earlier, he had just as good a chance as anyone in the field. In the

end, he made a mockery of the seedings by beating 2<sup>nd</sup>-seeded Japanese Davis Cupper Takao Yamamoto, 6-3, 1-6, 6-2, in the quarterfinals, saving a match point against Korean Davis Cupper Ju Chang-Nam, 2-6, 6-4, 7-5, in the semis, and then accounting for No. 1 seed and reigning [South East Asian Games champion Atet Wijono](#) of Indonesia in the final, 7-6(5), 6-2, to capture the title. Turned out, six months later in December 1978 that Wijono, a mainstay of his country's Davis Cup team, beat Japan's Shigeyuki Nishio in Bangkok to capture the [Asian Games men's singles gold medal](#).



In 1980, King relocated to Hong Kong after he took up a job with Citibank. It was during this time that his chapter of tennis in Hong Kong took shape. Right off the bat, he captured the CRC and SCAA Open men's singles titles to attain the local No. 1 ranking. At the time, the SCAA Open had been the only local tournament to offer prize money since 1978 (men's singles and doubles only) and King's triumph in 1980 was worth a cool HK\$5,500. The following year, in 1981, he captured CRC again by beating Eddie Koo and added the Hong Kong Closed Hardcourt Championships by defeating Paul Bourdon to once again hold the year-end Hong Kong No. 1 ranking. Seventeen-year-old Kelvin Ng, meanwhile, bagged his first local major at SCAA with a

win over Eric Koo that year. In 1982, King was champion at CRC for the third year running but Englishman Bourdon, who competed in the qualifying at Wimbledon in 1979, managed to win both the SCAA Open and the Closed Hardcourt titles.

In 1983, while the CRC Open was suspended due to court repairs, the Hong Kong Closed Hardcourt Championships and SCAA Open were held back-to-back over a fortnight in December ahead of the Davis Cup tie against Taiwan that was scheduled for January of 1984. Back in town for the holidays from Cambridge where he was reading medicine, teenager Kelvin Ng, who only turned 20 on Boxing Day, demolished American newcomer Chris Romney, 6-0, 6-0, in just 38 minutes at Victoria Park to claim the Closed Hardcourt title. Romney had earlier dropped the opening set against King in the semifinal but fought back to take the second and third sets, 6-1, 7-6(5). At SCAA final the following week, King won the first set 6-3 against Ng but his opponent took his chances well in a back-and-forth tiebreaker to win it 7-4 to draw even. Ng rode the flow to jump out to a 2-0 lead in the third but was collared by King in the sixth game when the American broke back to force a 3-

3 impasse. However, Ng broke again in a hard-fought penultimate ninth game and held serve to preserve a 3-6, 7-6(4), 6-4, victory and picked up a handsome HK\$15,000 for his effort.



year-old debutante Liu Chung-Hsing, 6-1, 4-6, 6-4, 8-6, to secure a morale-boosting 2-1 lead. King's experience against tour players and assertive play in the forecourt provided a great anchor on top of the chemistry they had been building. By gaining the crucial doubles point, it gave both Ng and [Mark Bailey](#) a chance to clinch the tie in the reverse singles. Ultimately, Ng's serve and volley game proved too strong for Liu, as he won the fifth and deciding rubber in straight sets, 6-3, 7-5, 6-2, to cement the territory's [first-ever triumph in the Davis Cup](#).



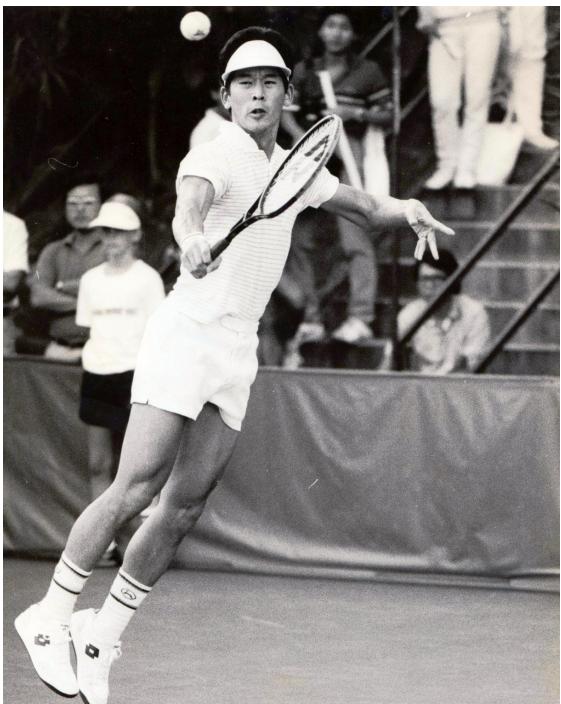
King partnered Ng to capture the doubles in both weeks, overcoming Romney and John Holsinger, 5-7, 6-4, 6-2, for the Closed Hardcourt title and again over the same duo at SCAA, 7-6(3), 7-5. This collaboration with Ng proved to be invaluable because on January 14, 1984, King made his Davis Cup debut for Hong Kong in the crucial doubles on the second day partnering his young associate. The pair overcame Wu Chang-Rung and 19-

Hong Kong then faced Thailand at Victoria Park in March when King battled Thai champion [Sombat Uamongkol](#), an aggressive southpaw all the way to a fifth set before going down, 4-6, 8-6, 8-6, 1-6, 6-4. Sombat, like King, although not ranked at the time of play, would go on to reach a career-high ATP No. 525 in singles and No. 682 in doubles in 1986. Kelvin Ng took the first set against Panomkorn Pladchurnil before the Thai came back to win it, 6-8, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4. Down 2-0, King and Ng faced a must-win situation. They managed to grab a two sets to one lead but Panomkorn and Sombat, the 1983 SEA Games doubles champion, registered an unassailable 3-0 lead for Thailand with a come-from-behind victory 6-3, 3-6, 9-11, 6-3, 6-2.



The local scene was dominated by 18-year-old Colin Grant in 1984 when he beat King in both the SCAA and CRC Open finals, and then over Hugh Hyde for the Closed Hardcourts, to complete the Triple Crown. King, however, came back with a bang in 1985, taking out Andy Brothers, 4-6, 7-5, 6-4, in a rain-affected final for the SCAA title as the top seed. At CRC, King edged then schoolboy, now CEO of HKTA, Chris Lai, 4-6, 6-3, 7-6(1), in the semis with what newspapers reported at the time 'stunning

tennis' and then posted a 7-5, 6-0, over former eight-time winner Tau Luu in the final. For good measure, he partnered Tau Luu to capture the doubles title at all three local majors. In the Davis Cup, King again paired with Ng for a key doubles win against Singapore in the first round that ultimately resulted in a 4-1 win for the team. This Singaporean side, with an identical lineup, had earlier captured a silver medal in the SEA Games men's team event in 1981 and later copped another bronze in 1985. That year, SCAA hosted the Kent Team Tennis Championships when King notched another stellar win against Japanese Davis Cupper and then ATP No. 484 Shinichi Sakamoto, 5-7, 6-2, 7-6(1).



In 1986, King represented Hong Kong in the Davis Cup for the last time. Against Malaysia in the first round, a side that was spearheaded by the uber talented 19-year-old [Adam Malik](#), a 6-foot-4 serve and volleyer, King and Bailey's, 3-6, 7-5, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4, come-from-behind victory turned out to be pivotal in the team's eventual 3-2 overall win, as the young Malay won both singles rubbers against Mark Bailey and [Colin Grant](#). Malik would go on to reach an NCAA top 10 ranking in both singles and doubles at the University of Kentucky, in addition to career-high ATP Rankings of No. 436 in singles and No. 122 in doubles. Then, against China in the quarterfinal in May, with Hong Kong trailing 2-0 after the opening singles at VP, King reunited with regular partner, Kelvin Ng, for the must-win doubles

but Liu Shu-Hua and You Wei did enough to cement a 6-2, 7-5, 8-10, 7-5 win to wrap up a 3-0 overall decision for the visitors.

In March 1986, Mark Bailey beat King in the title decider to capture the inaugural Hong Kong University Open Tennis Championships, which turned out to be his last Open final in singles. Having captured six doubles titles at the Hong Kong Closed Hardcourt Championships with four different partners, he teamed up with the mercurial Venant Shum, who was twice nominated for Davis Cup duty in 1987, and finished runners-up that year. King did pair with former ATP No. 168 and ex-Austrian Davis Cupper Bernhard Pils to capture the SCAA men's doubles in 1990, and that was his last brush with Open tennis locally.

However, King continued to play the game in seniors events, such as captaining an Italia Cup (men's 35+) side in Melbourne one year that boasted Tau Luu and Don Bozarth on its roster. The Hong Kong team managed to beat Ireland in the opening round before exiting at the hands of the Aussies.



In 1995, King partnered his daughter to win the Parent & Child doubles at the Hong Kong Country Club. Clementine, who played No. 1 singles at Bryn Mawr College, was presented with The Arthur Ashe, Jr. Sports-Scholar Award by Billie Jean King herself in 2003. This prestigious award, which dates back to 1982, is presented to the men's and women's national student-athletes who have exhibited outstanding sportsmanship and leadership, in addition to scholastic, extracurricular,

and tennis achievements. Such memories mean the world to him now more than ever before, more than all the victories and trophies he had fought so valiantly for in his entire career.

At the ATP Seniors event in Hong Kong in 1996, King was paired up with the Ice Man himself, Swedish great, [Bjorn Borg](#), and beat Mark Cox and Paul McNamee before they were halted by Stan Smith and Peter McNamara. He also teamed up with former Stanford tennis star John Isaacs and won the CRC Open Veterans' 45 or Over doubles title from 1995-1997 and again with Ling Fong in 1998.

*"I went to the net at every opportunity. I do not use the words chip and charge. My approach shots were almost always flat or topspin, rarely undercut unless I was pulled in with a low ball. If you chip, the ball sits up and gives the other guy time to hit. With topspin, the ball is dipping. The percentages and probability favor the*

*net player. My doubles win-loss record is superior to my singles. To find success partnering different players was something I was very pleased with as I grew older. My only regret was I didn't poach more!"*

By 1995, however, King was in Guangzhou due to work commitments with increasing regularity, up to three, four days a week, and it was this time period when he began to transition to golf after his wife bought him a set of clubs. He remains a keen golfer today. Tennis-wise, though, he seldom sits down specifically just to watch the game.

*"The French Open is taking place right now and the TV is on, but I'm not sitting there watching a whole match. Rarely. If the TV commentators are jabbering away, I mute the station and watch a little. If it's a former pro commentating, who's making sense, then I'll keep the volume on. I like credible commentators like McEnroe and Navratilova, or Nick Faldo with golf."*



In August 2019, the International Lawn Tennis Club (IC) of Hong Kong played host to the Asia/Oceania Junior Challenge for the first time and King was the Master of Ceremonies for the official Welcoming Dinner. Tennis legends worldwide see the International Club as an avenue to rekindle or maintain their links with the game, as well as treating it as an opportunity to give something back to the sport they love. Over time, IC has

evolved into a worldwide movement that promotes international goodwill and social values through tennis. Davis Cup players, past and present, are all IC members.

*"Kelvin is the Chairman of IC Hong Kong. He invited me to assist the IC's promotion of junior tennis in Asia and by extension promote Hong Kong tennis, Hong Kong Tennis Association, and increase the visibility of the Hong Kong Country Club, the host venue, where I am a member."*

In 2019, Randall King was inducted into the HKTA Hall of Fame together with KC Dao, Mark Bailey, and Janet Hardisty. Looking back, what he did was inadvertently follow wherever his racquet took him, worked hard, and made the best out of all

the situations he faced along the way. Happily married for 50 years, with two children, and four grand kids, he has won a lot more than words can discern – He won in life.