

KELVIN INGE - MY TENNIS JOURNEY



Born and bred in Hong Kong, he was introduced to the game by his late father, Kenneth, a tennis enthusiast who was dedicated to the development of the sport and served on the HKTA Council for over 30 years. The young novice picked up a racquet at the age of 9 and began competing regularly by 11. He was the first local boy to compete at Junior Wimbledon, US Open, and the Orange Bowl. At 15, he garnered a year-end ITF Ranking of No. 24. At 17, he became the *numero uno*, the top-ranked junior in the world. Then, a week after his 18th birthday, he produced some of his best tennis in his Davis Cup debut for Hong Kong. His name is Kelvin Inge, and this is his story.

By all accounts, Kelvin received instructions for the game initially from his father and later, according to Susan O'Sullivan's 1980 Cathay Pacific Airway's in-flight magazine piece, '*Kelvin Sets Sights On Wimbledon Championship*', he was picked out from a group of over one hundred schoolchildren by former Australian Davis Cupper and Wimbledon men's doubles finalist, [John Cooper](#), who had a brief coaching stint in the territory in the 1970s. The truth of the matter was that the young baller just wanted to get better every single day, no matter how or from whom, he loved to compete and win, and was determined to get to the next level.

"My dad had a lot to do with my tennis career and it wouldn't have been possible without his guidance. My mom is the one who helped me build my mental strength. Both were instrumental in shaping my life and career. Certainly, I felt that starting in the summer of 1977 through to 1982, I played a lot of good tennis and competed in some great matches for sure."

Locally, he attended St. Paul's College and was a multi-sport athlete, who represented the school in table tennis and badminton until his transfer to Wah Yan College (Kowloon) in 1976 when tennis became his sole focus. That year, together with [Patricia Hy](#), Mark Bailey, and nine others, they were selected to the Junior Squad, which in those days, trained once a week for three hours on Sundays. In time, he would capture different age-group championships in Hong Kong to become the No. 1 Junior in 1977. Amongst his many accolades, he was the recipient of the Sir Ivo Rigby trophy, an annual award given to the best all-round junior player in Hong Kong based upon performance, physical fitness, and sportsmanship.



Nov 1976 - World No. 3 Ilie Nastase conducting a special clinic for Junior Squad members Derek Ling, Patricia Hy, Gregory Taylor, Kelvin Inge, Fay Rusli, and Mark Bailey

Back then, the ATP Tour made a regular stopover in town, even though the name of the event has changed over time. From Viceroy Tennis Classic in 1973, International Hong Kong Classic to Hong Kong Tennis Patrons' Classic and from Seiko-Hong Kong Classic (featured also a WTA Tour event in 1980 and 1981) to lastly the Salem Open, which has been defunct since 2002. During the week of the tournament, kids like Kelvin were fortunate to receive special coaching by

arrangement from players such as [Ken Rosewall](#), [Ilie Nastase](#), Jimmy Connors, Kim Warwick, and Colin Dibley, to name a few. Although these clinics lasted for just a few hours, it was sufficient time for the touring pros to plant the seeds of their basic philosophy in the youngsters, and he was an eager sponge soaking up all the knowledge trickled down his way.

By 1978, Inge who was No. 1 Junior for the second year running, teamed up with Mark Bailey to finish runner-up in the under-16 boys' doubles at the 2nd Hong Kong Invitational Age-Group Championships to future ATP pros [Hajime Nihonmatsu](#) and [Shinichi Nishino](#) of Japan. Former world No. 1 [John Newcombe](#) gave a special one-day coaching class to six of the more senior members of the Junior Squad that year and afterwards it was announced that Inge, together with Patricia Hy, would attend an intensive two-week, all expenses paid training excursion in Australia in January 1979. He also went on the first ever international junior tour, the Pacific Northwest Junior circuit in



Kelvin Inge and Jimmy Arias made it all the way to the boys' doubles final in Japan

the US that summer, in 1978, with Bailey, Hy, Chang, and company. He did well and won many events, which helped to boost his confidence further.

In 1979, he captured the ASEAN Head Junior Invitation Championship in Singapore and was a runner-up in boys' doubles at the Japan Open Junior Championships. That year, the Hong Kong Invitational Age-Group (now Hong Kong Open Junior Championships) was included as part of the Pepsi-Cola ITF World Junior Series for the first time.

He won the under-16 singles and finished runner-up in the under-18 singles to

Korean No. 1, [Kim Bong Soo](#), who went on to reach ATP No. 129 later in his career and won a gold in men's doubles and a silver in singles at the 1986 Asian Games. In June, six months before his 16th birthday, he became the first Hong Kong player to compete at Junior Wimbledon where he beat Thai No. 1 Panomkorn Pladchurnil, 2-6, 6-1, 6-1, before he was ousted by 4th-seeded American [Ben Testerman](#) in a more than respectable second round affair, 7-5, 6-4. Testerman, almost two years older, was the perennial top-ranked junior in America for his age group throughout his career, and who later also became the junior world No. 1.

Later that September, Inge left Hong Kong on a CPA (Cathay Pacific Airways) Scholarship to continue his education at [Millfield](#), an English boarding school in Somerset renowned for its sporting prowess that boasts a plethora of British and international team representatives. Astoundingly, athletes from Millfield have participated at every Olympic Games since [Melbourne 1956](#). Old Millfieldian tennis players include former ATP No. 13 [Mark Cox](#) and ex-Berkeley No. 1 [Conor Niland](#).

In December, he would travel to Florida, USA to train with [Harry Hopman](#) before he became the first player from Hong Kong to compete in the Orange Bowl, which was traditionally viewed as a pilgrimage of sorts, a rite of passage in junior tennis, because it

signified both as the first tournament on US soil for many foreign players, as well as the first international event for Americans. In the B16 singles, he was narrowly upended by [Paul Annacone](#) in the last sixteen in a third set tiebreak, while future ATP No. 1 [Mats Wilander](#) turned out to be the eventual champion. He then competed at the Rolex International Junior event in New York. When 1979 drew to a close, he held a year-end

ITF	Junior	Ranking	of	No.	24.
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Together with frequent hitting partner, Richard Hawkes, pictured here at the famed terraced grasscourts in Tai Tam

During the twelve months preceding his departure to Millfield, Inge reveled on the court and, in no uncertain terms, played virtually from dusk till dawn. With academics placed tentatively on the back-burner, he found himself honing his game playing wherever he could, including private facilities beyond most people's reach. Take the terraced hillside grass courts at the The Hon. M.W. Lo's properties at Tai Tam, for instance – Stanley Lodge and Palm Villa (partly where the

American Club sits today) – a site that provided the iconic backdrop to Bruce Lee's 1973 blockbuster with Warner Brothers, [Enter The Dragon](#).

He also frequented the Chief Secretary's court up on Barker Road at The Peak, as well as the Attorney General's court, where access was facilitated by former Hong Kong No. 1 Richard Hawkes, a Davis Cupper from New Zealand, who later became a Chief District Court Judge here locally. HKTA Hall of Famer, [Randall King](#), incidentally, was another one of Hawkes' favourite hitting buddies.

In 1980, the ASEAN Head Junior Championships, first played in Singapore the year before, was held in Hong Kong. It was sponsored by A.M.F. Head and Robertson Wilson Co., Ltd. The event normally entails a team competition followed by an individual tournament, but since it immediately preceded the HK Open Junior Championships that year, only the team version was held. Inge anchored the Hong Kong under-18 team comprising Mark Bailey, Jimmy Chang, Paul Bailey, and Stephen Chang (reserve) to a 3rd place finish behind Philippines and defending champs, Indonesia. Over the summer, he

competed at Wimbledon for the second year running and then boarded a flight to America where he immediately took part in a number of tune-up events in preparation for the US Open for the first time.

Earlier that year, he and his dad had begun to entertain the notion of playing college tennis and perhaps even turning professional after graduation, so they already started corresponding with a number of US colleges. Several coaches came to talk to him during his week in New York to discuss the potential of Inge joining their tennis programmes. Having spent more than two months on the road by himself travelling from Wimbledon tune-ups to competing weekly on the North American circuit leading to the Canadian International Junior Championships and finally US Open, he was looking forward to go home following a first round exit at Flushing Meadows to Italian No. 1, [Luca Bottazzi](#).

Becoming world No. 1

Back from Millfield for the Easter break in 1981, Inge went on a tear during the Asian Swing, taking part in four tournaments in as many weeks. First, he led a Hong Kong contingent consisting of Mark Bailey, Kester Ng, Paul Bailey, and Jimmy Chang to a second-place finish at the Head Cup in Kuala Lumpur. Following that, he captured the Head Junior Invitational Championships under-18 boys' singles. Then, at the Head Thailand International Junior Championships in Bangkok, he claimed the under-18 boys' singles again and was runner-up in the doubles with Bailey. At the Asian Junior Championships in Hyderabad, he teamed up with Bailey to win the boys' doubles title. Finally, at the Hong Kong Open Junior Championships, after he swept both under-18 boys' singles and doubles titles, he headed straight to Kai Tak.

Inge had no time to pause nor ponder, for even when the ITF Rankings were released in May 1981 that saw him rise to No. 1, he had already made a mad dash back to boarding school half a world away in preparation for the upcoming A Level Maths exams, which he took a year early, and the Cambridge Entrance Exams in Medical Sciences, fully aware the potential consequence of a less than stellar showing. For on the line, too, was his application for the inaugural Jardine Scholarship, an award given out by Jardine Matheson in the wake of its 150th anniversary to qualified students in pursuit of higher education at Oxford or Cambridge University. He would subsequently be offered a place to read Medical Sciences at Downing College, Cambridge in January 1982 and became the first Jardine Scholar to go to University of Cambridge in October 1982.

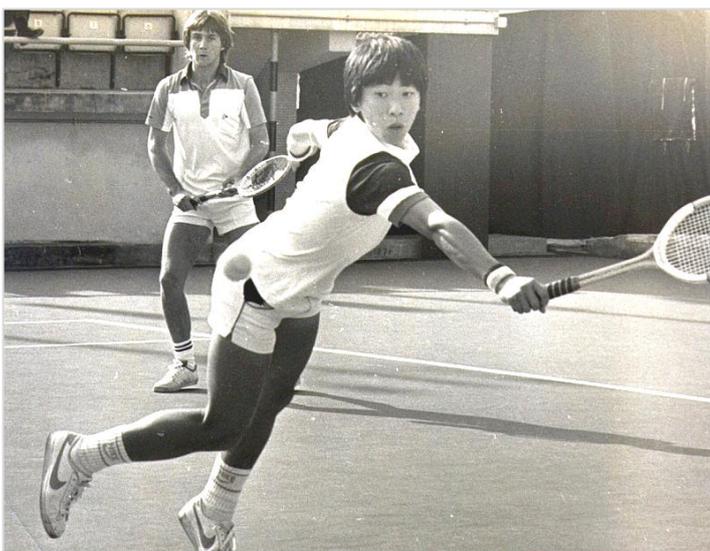


The mastery of the classic backhand slice is a quintessential element to the beauty of the vaunted all-court game

"In the heat of the battle, both mental strength and confidence are very important. More often than not, especially in big matches, there is only a fine line between winning and losing. And you need a bit of luck too. You can get in the 'zone' when your head is very clear, that's the next level in all sports. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, the game is easy. In your mind, you just can't miss."

That summer at SW19, he beat future ATP No. 22 [Ronald Agenor](#) in the opening round of the boys' singles before he fell to No. 7 seed and eventual champion, Matt Anger, who ended up besting Pat Cash in the final. In the draw were a number of future ATP top 10 players the likes of [Joakim Nystrom](#), [Miloslav Mecir](#), Pat Cash, Henri Leconte, and [Henrik Sundstrom](#). Later that August, four months prior to his 18th birthday, he captured the SCAA Open men's singles title, his first local major.

Hong Kong back on Davis Cup map



Both Inge and Bailey were making their Davis Cup debuts in 1982 against Philippines at Victoria Park

Hong Kong first made its Davis Cup debut in 1970 in the Eastern Zone, but after first round losses against Japan twice, Australia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Sri Lanka (walkover), it was decided that the territory would not participate until the standard of play was high enough to ensure a meaningful challenge. Therefore, since 1976, Hong Kong did not compete in the Davis Cup. Only with the emergence of Inge and Bailey did Hong Kong terminate the self-imposed hiatus to return to action.

Against the Philippines in 1982, Inge, 18, and in his debut appearance, was spectacular in dismissing both Manuel Valleramos, 6-4, 7-5, 6-3 and Ody Gabriel 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 respectively in straight sets. Valleramos had been a silver medalist in men's singles at the South East Asian Games in 1979, a bronze medalist in 1981, and a gold medalist in 1983. However, Inge and Bailey, who won the boys' doubles title at the 1981 Asian Junior Championships, could not overcome reigning SEA Games champion, Alexander Marcial and Gabriel, as the teenagers lost, 8-6, 6-2, 6-4.

"I really felt like I was in the zone in both singles, that feeling of incredible shot-making every player gets when he is at the top of his game. It seemed that every shot I attempted turned out to be a spectacular winner or it landed wherever I was aiming for. It was unreal."

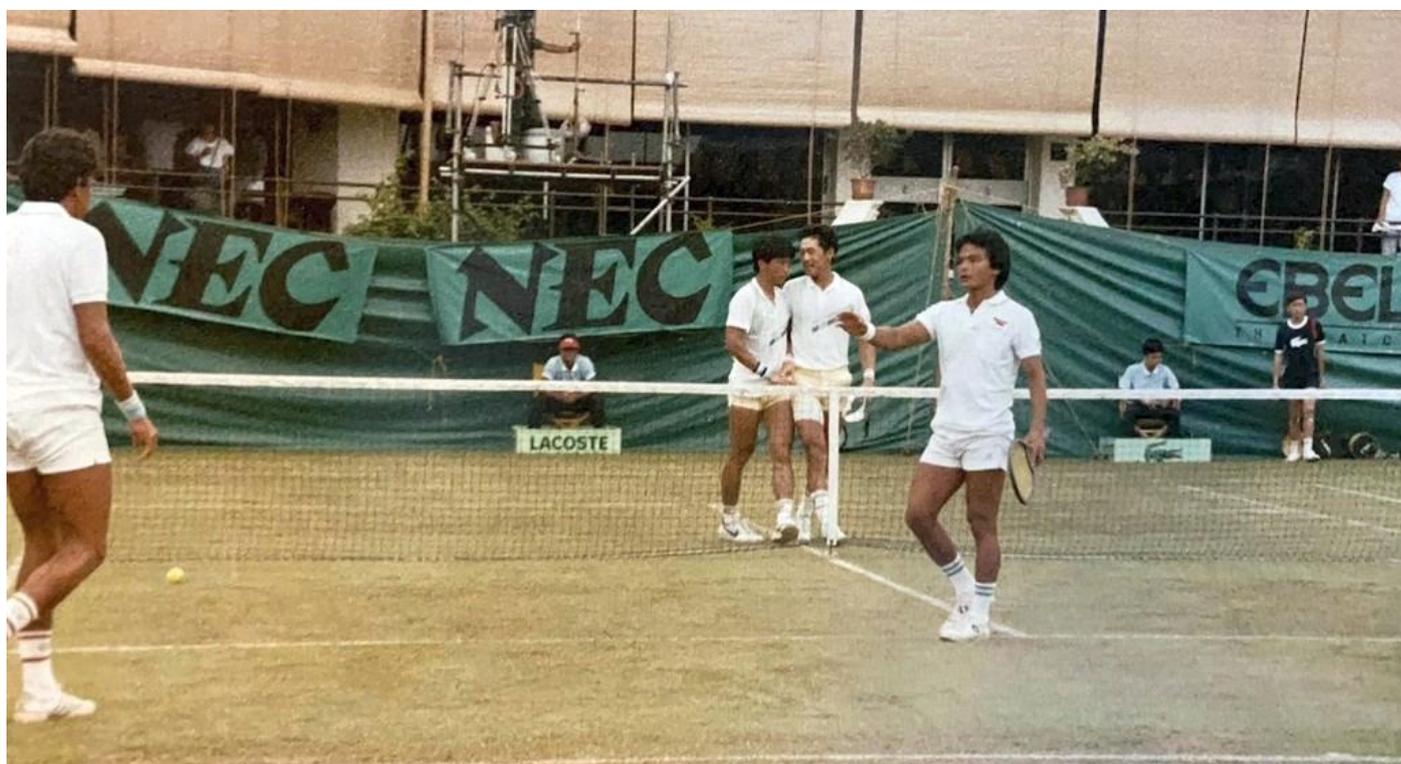
While there is no telling how Bailey would have fared had he assumed singles duty that weekend, the fact remains that not only did Hong Kong lose 3-2, the team never came close to beating Philippines again. For Hong Kong succumbed 5-0 to a Felix Barrientos led contingent in Group I in 1989, and then followed by 4-1 defeats in Group II in 1998, 2004, and 2009.

By January 1983, Hong Kong was eager to have another shot at its first-ever win in the Davis Cup. Inge once again flew back from England, this time for the away tie against Sri Lanka in the Eastern Zone first round. The home team was spearheaded by former ATP No. 293 [Arjun Fernando](#), the 1979 NCAA Division II singles and doubles champion out of SIU Edwardsville, a school that also produced the future Grand Slam-winning world No. 1 tandem of [Ken Flach and Rob Seguso](#).

Unfortunately for Inge, an unsuspecting cheeseburger at the Hilton resulted in a severe bout of gastroenteritis that left him drained and bedridden with a fever in the lead-up to the tie. Miraculously, on Day 1, he took the opening set against Frank Sebaratnam but by the time he trailed, 2-6, 6-2, 6-1, he was physically spent, forced to retire, and was ruled out for the remainder of the tie. After conceding the doubles to trail 2-1, Bailey then went down in five sets against Sebaratnam, as the territory remained in search of that elusive maiden victory.

That year, the Hong Kong Closed Hardcourt Championships (now Hong Kong Nationals) and SCAA Open were held in December and they provided much needed tune-up

opportunities ahead of the January 1984 Davis Cup clash against Chinese Taipei. Inge bagged the HK Nationals by blanking American newcomer Chris Romney, who upset Randall King in the semifinal courtesy of a third set tiebreak. At the SCAA Open final the following week, he and King faced off in a 'clash of the titans' finale and Inge overcame the loss of the first set to storm back for a 3-6, 7-6(4), 6-4, victory that earned him a



Jan 1985 - Inge and King combined for the crucial doubles point to set up his tie-clinching singles against Singapore

cool HK\$15,000. In the doubles, Inge teamed up with King to beat Romney and John Holsinger, 5-7, 6-4, 6-2, for the HK National title and then, 7-6(3), 7-5, over the same opposition in the SCAA Open title match. In retrospect, what the fortnight facilitated most was the course of familiarization between Inge and King, the opportunity to develop chemistry based on each other's tendencies and strengths, for doubles turned out to be a critical factor in garnering the win in Taipei.

After splitting the opening singles with the Taiwanese, the HK duo combined to defeat Wu Chang-Rung and Liu Chung-Hsing, 6-1, 4-6, 6-4, 8-6, to stake the team a monumental 2-1 lead, which then gave either Bailey or Inge the chance to clinch the tie in the reverse singles. As it turned out, Wu, who was ranked ATP No. 793 that week, beat Bailey in four to level proceedings at 2-2, but Inge took control of his match by outclassing Liu, the 19-year-old debutante, 6-3, 7-5, 6-2, to seal Hong Kong's first win in the Davis Cup since the team's initial participation in 1970. In fact, Hong Kong was

unable to win a set in any of its ties during the first six years of play until Inge's arrival in 1982 when he took both his singles in his sensational debut against Philippines.

In the ensuing round in March, Hong Kong took on Thailand at Victoria Park. After King was defeated by opposing No. 1 Sombat Uamongkol, 4-6, 8-6, 8-6, 1-6, 6-4, in the opening singles in which he had set points in 4 of the 5 sets played, Inge took the first set against Panomkorn Pladchurnil before the in-form Thai settled down to win, 6-8, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4. In singles play at the SEA Games, Panomkorn was the 1981 gold and 1985 silver medalist, while Uamongkol won a silver in 1981 and added a bronze in 1983. Trailing 2-0, Ng and King faced a must-win situation in the doubles. 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 6-3, 3-6, 9-11, 6-3, 6-2, victory.

"To really excel, you need to be single-minded and have passion for the sport. You actually need to play fearlessly like a kid, but with the mental fortitude of an adult. There are always ups and downs along the way."



Inge competed against Ivy League standouts such as Larry Scott (Harvard) and Martin Wostenholme (Yale) at the biennial Prentice Cup

Inge started at Cambridge in October 1982, representing the University team in the 5 years he was there. He was Captain in 1985 and won all his matches at the No.1 position in the annual varsity match between Oxford and Cambridge where the latter was undefeated during his time there. In the summer of 1984, Inge was selected to represent a combined Oxford/Cambridge squad against a Harvard/Yale contingent in the Prentice Cup at the Seabright LTCC, a bi-

annual British-US intercollegiate competition steeped in history. It was held alternately between the All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club, Wimbledon and the Seabright Lawn Tennis & Cricket Club in New Jersey. This year, in 2021, is the 100th anniversary of the event.

In 1985, he was again nominated to play No. 1 singles for the Davis Cup Eastern first round away tie against Singapore. After beating the opposing No. 2 in straight sets on

the first day, Inge and King teamed up for a key four-set win in the doubles to see Hong Kong take a 2-1 lead after Bailey went down in five sets against opposing No. 1, Mahader Hassan, a five-time national champion and the 1979 National Collegiate Junior All-American. Then, with an emotionally charged partisan crowd already having reached fever pitch on Friday now growing increasingly passionate, Inge swiftly outclassed Hassan, 6-2, 6-1, 9-7 to seal the deal and, in the process, became the first player to win three live rubbers in a Davis Cup tie for Hong Kong.



The HKG Davis Cup squad ahead of its 1986 Eastern Zone QF clash with China. L-R: Kevin Livesey, Colin Grant, Mark Bailey, Kelvin Inge, and Randall King

Inge's curtain call for Davis Cup duty was the Eastern Zone quarterfinal tie against China in May 1986. By now, however, into his fourth year at Cambridge, he was to make peace with the fact that it became unrealistic to have high expectations without the necessary preparations, in terms of form, competitions and fitness at the very least, especially when facing tricky opponents, such as You Wei and Liu Shu-Hua. Liu's 6-3, 6-3, 6-2 win against Bailey was followed by You's 6-1,

6-1, 6-4 victory in the second singles over Inge that gave China a 2-0 advantage.

Then he partnered King for the last time and fought with all they had before going down against You and Liu 6-2, 7-5, 8-10, 7-5. At age 22, that was his final competitive match for Hong Kong, he had already set the course he was going to embark on. He has nothing but fond memories of playing carefree tennis, winning big, tough matches, and going wherever his racquet took him. Some of the connections he made with others along his journey are nearer and dearer to his heart than anyone can ever imagine. Once he decided to pursue academia and medical school, tennis had to take very much a back seat. He continued to play in social matches representing the IC of Great Britain and the AELTC as a temporary member whilst he was working in the UK.

From 1996-2000, he captained the Hong Kong Davis Cup team for 12 ties in all and it was during his tenure that in 1997, he gave [Wayne Wong](#) his debut against Thailand when the kid was a month shy of his 16th birthday. Nowadays, he is an avid golfer, often seen frequenting the putting greens more so than the hardcourts – his last

'competitive matches' were during the exhibition Masters held at the Hong Kong Country Club back in 1998, when he partnered Anand Amritraj and played against Peter Fleming/Roscoe Tanner and Bjorn Borg/Vijay Amritraj. Further injuries had curtailed his play even more since 1998.

Happily married since 1988, he has a daughter and a son, who are working in the legal and finance professions respectively. Both represented Hong Kong internationally in junior elite golf and attended universities in the UK on golf scholarships. A full-time cardiologist himself, he continues his involvement in sports and is currently the Hon. Secretary for the International Lawn Tennis Club (ILTC) of Hong Kong, Trustee member of the Hong Kong Junior Golf Foundation and Chairman of the HKTA Foundation.



Inge giving his acceptance speech at the HOF induction ceremony in 2016, exactly forty years since he was awarded the Sir Ivo Rigby Trophy

"I thoroughly enjoyed the time I had with tennis. That's where my life took me. Whether or not I could have been very good as a pro, you just don't know, and won't know unless you're all in on it. School and academia beckoned, so starting from 1982, pro tennis was never really on the cards for me anymore."

Kelvin Inge was inducted into the HKTA Hall of Fame in 2016.