

By Jerry Scorse
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Leg Ailment May End Johnson's Tennis Play; Won 12 City Titles

“Something you do all your life, you just can't say ‘Goodbye... I'm done.’”

Anxious words these were, born in physical anguish and nourished in mental struggle, yet Len Johnson uttered them as though a Stoic.

He meant them as sincerely as the swish of his powerful arm has sent tennis balls rocketing past bewildered opponents, but his modesty was there to catch and cushion the impact.

Two things, you see, have entered the life of Len Johnson for the first time. Primarily important is the mysterious ailment that has attacked his right leg and threatens the end of a gaudy career; secondly, he has been nominated for Jamestown's Hall of Fame – and “I don't think I am even qualified for it.”

That's an unselfish compliment for a man whose lean figure has poured so much into Jamestown tennis for nearly two decades.

Built Own Court

There was never much tennis interest in Len's family. How he happened to pick it up is a hazy question. Anyway, sometime in the mid 1930s “this lady down on Hopkins Street donated the money and we built this clay court (the Maple Leaf) on Blackstone Avenue.

“I remember we hauled the clay up by horse and wagon and spent about three weeks working on the court. That's where Naomi Berg (nee Johnson) and a lot of the others got their start.”

For Len, a natural athlete who has dabbled with remarkable success in baseball, basketball, golf, and still bowls regularly, tennis was a challenging frontier.

There was never any formal schooling. He learned by playing along with the rest of the regular habitués. Naomi, the Tardetes, Dewey and Kenny Johnson, Fred Bocchine, Aldo Bocchine and Marion Panzarella.

“He (Panzarella) helped me a lot when I first started to play.”

Mostly it was through tournaments that Len improvised and perfected his strokes. Men like Gene Wingertzahn from Dunkirk and Sherman Card of Fredonia— “you

learned an awful lot awfully fast playing guys like that. You learned how far back you really were."

12-Time City Titlist

Len was not long far back. He began winning, so much so that now, riding the crest of 39 championships and 12 successive city titles, "I'm more interested in getting the youngsters started. I like what Ronnie Carlson (Recreation Tennis Director) is doing, getting the kids, out there."

Johnson and his Tennis Club counterparts undertook a like project some years ago but "we're a limited number and all have jobs every day, and unless you can give the kids all of your time, you're letting them down."

Of his titles, Len labels the three Chautauqua Institution Tournament victories as "the toughest to me" pointing out the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the competition. "People don't realize it," he explained, "but there're guys up there from, darn near all over the country."

The 37-year-old hails the present caliber of tennis in Jamestown "as high as it ever was."

No Surgery Yet

"Actually we've come a long way since tennis developed here. We just have an awful time keeping in-between players. That's why I go along so strongly on this new Rec program.

Len's leg affliction is definitely serious. When he strains himself at all, the calf pains "terribly" and his leg goes numb. The pulse-beat on the top of his foot diminishes to well below normal.

But he wants to see if the injury will work itself out before he risks any surgery.

"When you get as crippled up as I am, then you begin to appreciate these younger players coming along." And how much do these players appreciate the trail-blazing Johnson has done?