

INDUCTEE PROFILE



Karen Gallagher stands in front of her “wall of fame” — including the 16 USTA national championships she’s won.

Gallagher overcame to net success

Hollidaysburg product won 16 national championships

By Neil Rudel
Altoona Mirror

When Karen (Brumbaugh) Gallagher was growing up in Hollidaysburg in the mid-1960s, Title IX didn’t exist.

It was a far cry from the scenes of today, when girls in elementary school, junior high and high school receive equal opportunities for participation, are coached from the ground up and often receive the same community support as their male counterparts.

And it doesn’t stop after high school. Those who are good enough earn scholarships to continue their

pursuit at the collegiate level, and even those who just enjoy their sport find countless opportunities at smaller colleges around the country.

Gallagher had to forge her own trail.

“I was a late starter,” she said from her home in Vail, Colo. “In those days, the only sports they had for girls were cheerleading and tennis. I decided I better learn to play tennis. But I didn’t start playing until I was 15.”

Before the Blair Racquet Club (now ProCare) opened, “There were no indoor tennis facilities,” Gallagher said. Now there are two in Altoona, ProCare and the Summit Tennis & Ath-

letic Center, and a third in Ebensburg.

The only child of Harold and Edie Brumbaugh, her parents “didn’t play tennis,” and didn’t necessarily think Karen should be, either.

“I was kind of a typical girl growing up in that era,” she said. “My parents were interested in my taking ballet and piano lessons and clarinet lessons, but I wasn’t pushed into the sports realm. They didn’t play tennis. They didn’t ski. So I was pretty self-taught.”

She’d go to the racquet club and hit with the Parsons family — Steve, her Hall of Fame presenter, his dad Tom, a former athlete at Duke, and his uncle



Karen was a member of the United States Tennis Association's silver-medal winning team in the Maria Bueno Cup in Austria in 2001.

Bill, the Hall of Fame's first tennis inductee (1988).

"It was a matter of hitting balls against the wall," she said. "I loved hitting with the Parsons guys — they were always nice enough to play. And there were some boys on the (Hollidaysburg) team."

She also liked playing at Mansion Park — "it was the nicest (outdoor) facility," better than the asphalt courts Hollidaysburg had at the time.

Her ability and determination made her Hollidaysburg's No. 1 player as a junior and a senior and, like many young tennis players, she sought regional and statewide tournament competition and found it in the United States Tennis Association and Middle States junior programs.

"I improved pretty rapidly," she said.

Still, there weren't a lot of collegiate options. After graduation in 1969, she went to Penn State Altoona for one year. She hoped that might lead to a feeler from the program at University Park, but it didn't.

"I like to think obstacles tend to open doors to opportunities," she said. "I decided I wanted to transfer to a college in the south where I could play year-round."

So she "stumbled on Trinity," a small school in Texas that played Division I in tennis in a lower division in all of its other sports.

"It was great," she said. "The teams back then were small, and they didn't have as many people. We only had four (players) that went to nationals, and then it expanded."

Gallagher contributed to Trinity's Division I NCAA title in 1973 (Trinity has since shifted to Division III).

While her college career was winding down, her playing career in some ways was just beginning. She moved to Colorado in 1981 and became a teaching pro. When she turned 35, while visiting a relative, she entered a Middle States event on the grass courts at Merion in Philadelphia and beat one of the top seeds.

Encouraged, she started entering more events and started placing regularly in national events before winning her first "gold ball," in the USTA hard courts tournament in 1991.

Over the next 15 years, she would amass 16 gold balls, and she's won national championships on every surface — four in singles, four in mixed doubles and eight in doubles — while competing on hard courts, clay, indoors and on grass.

Her resume includes helping the United States to victory in the Margaret Court Cup in Uruguay, multiple times, and at the Senior World Games in 2005-06.

"I've been very proud to represent the country," she said.

Two of Gallagher's friends and foes cited her natural ability and competitive fire as key ingredients to her success.

Priscilla Sisson is a former Colorado State assistant coach who has won a national championship herself. She took lessons from Gallagher.

"She taught me everything I know," Sisson said. "When I came to Fort Collins, I was pregnant and didn't know anybody. I took lessons from her every week. She can watch somebody hit a ball and tell you within a couple minutes what they need to do differently."

They played singles — "I think I beat her one time out of 100 and it made me cry," Sisson said — and then became doubles partners for years.

"I've known Karen for 32 years," Sisson said. "I've played tennis, golf and skied with her. We've competed in everything, and she's good at everything. She's a very conscientious person and a perfectionist."

Gallagher also enjoyed a competitive rivalry with Carol Baily, a former world champion in singles who also holds many USTA national titles and "is in more Hall of Fames than I can remember."

Gallagher defeated Baily for a USTA singles title in 1992, and they later teamed to win a national doubles championship in the 45-and-over division.



Gallagher bio

Sport: Tennis

High school: Hollidaysburg Area

College: Trinity (Texas)

Hall of Fame achievement: Has won 16 United States Tennis Association national championships.

Current residence: Vail, Colo.

"We were competitors for many years," Gallagher said. "Carol won the most — as in almost always."

Both are in the Colorado Sports-women's Hall of Fame.

"Karen is just a fabulous athlete," Baily said. "She's a great tennis player, skier, golfer. It seems whatever she picks up, she does awfully well. Her drive and her desire and her competitiveness (stood out). She had a never-say-die attitude. Plus she had great groundstrokes, and she was almost ahead of her time in that she had a lot of topspin on the ball where a lot of people her age did not.

"It was more fun playing with her than against her. But we always had very competitive matches and she's just been a really good friend over many, many years."

Throughout her playing career, Gallagher remained a teacher.

"She was a great high school tennis coach and then she moved up to the Vail area where she got the Eagle Vail Tennis Club off its feet," Sisson said. "Kids love her. She's really good with adolescents and she's great for setting up programs — and in the tennis world, there's a lot of discrimination



Karen was honored as an inductee into the Sportswomen of Colorado Hall of Fame in 2004. Her presenter was Ellen Miller (left).

against women, women pros especially. You don't get the opportunities men get. And she's ridden those waves with integrity."

Gallagher's last national championship came in 2003 in the 50-and-over at the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills, N.Y., which gave her a national title on every surface.

In 2009, she was injured getting off a chair lift and needed a hip replacement. She's recovered but in the process decided to put down her racquet.

"Since I'm healthy again, I decided I'm going to do things I haven't done while I can enjoy them," she said, adding she's taught herself to play golf.

"I'm not great, but I'm getting better," she said.

Her "index" is down to a 7.7.

Gallagher becomes the third tennis player enshrined in the Hall of Fame, joining Bill Parsons and former professional Martin Goldberg.

Her candidacy was championed by Steve Parsons' wife, Carol, a long-time friend.

"It's an honor, and it was certainly unexpected," Gallagher said. "It's very nice to be thought of in that way, and I've done my best to give back to the tennis community because a lot was given to me that opened up opportunities. I certainly appreciate the recognition."

NOMINATION INFORMATION

The Blair County Sports Hall of Fame has been consistent throughout its existence in having the same criteria for induction consideration. It is as follows:

1. The individual was born or lived in Blair County.
2. The individual has attained national, regional or statewide recognition in his or her sport.
3. The individual must be retired from his or her sport a minimum of two years.

To nominate an individual or team for consideration, please send a letter of nomination, with documented information, to:

Blair County Sports Hall of Fame
P.O. Box 162
Altoona, PA 16603

or email to bcsporthalloffame@gmail.com.