

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT
African American History
MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program

Interviewees: John Wilkerson (coach), George Kennard, Jermayn Mack, Larry Thomas, Meg Toups, Patrick Jefferson, Rachelle Mack, Davita Mack Lowe, Leon Belcher, Michon Benson

Interview Date: June 19, 2012

Place: Palo Duro Room at University of Houston's University Center

Interviewer: Steph McDougal

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

This group interview with the alumni of the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program, including noted coach John Wilkerson, focuses upon the effects of the program in motivating and driving its members for their various successes in life. Topics include the importance and rewards of dedication, the shared sense of community and family built by the group, the accomplishments of Coach Wilkerson and two of his most successful protégés (Zina Garrison and Lori McNeil), as well as some of the challenges and adversities faced in the program.

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SM: This is Steph McDougal with McDew Preservation in Houston Texas. Today is June 19, 2012. I'm interviewing for the first time a panel of five people, all of whom are alumni of the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program. This interview is taking place in the Palo Duro Room of the University of Houston's University Center and the interview is being conducted for the University of Houston's Our Town Initiative. Our topic today will be the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis program. Well ladies and gentleman, thank you for taking the time to talk with me this evening. Before we begin I'd like to go around the table and if you would please, each of you state your first and last name, where you live now, and your occupation.

GK: Okay, George Kennard. I currently live in Dallas, Texas and am currently employed with the Xerox Corporation.

JM: Jermayn Mack and I live in Sugar Land, Texas and I'm currently own my own practice as an architect.

LT: Larry Thomas, I live in La Marque, Texas and I am currently a teacher, a physical education teacher teaching golf and tennis.

MT: Meg Toups, former name Richardson and currently I live in Houston, Texas and I'm a business owner in the IT field.

PJ: Patrick Jefferson. I currently live in Houston, Texas, a software engineer. I'm freelance, self employed.

SM: Great, well let's begin at the beginning. What neighborhoods did you live in as children and how far away was MacGregor Park from your home? And you can jump in we don't have to go around, just however you would like to do that.

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GK: Okay I'll go ahead I lived in, I grew up in Cloverland Park which is south, southeast Houston, about 15 minutes away, 30 minutes by bus when we had to take the bus to practice every day.

LT: I lived about 7 minutes if you were running on the bayou from MacGregor Park and my mother still lives in that house today. It is in the middle of, it is right off of the bayou that we used to run every day and I'd say it's about 5 minutes by car and like I say about 15 minutes by bayou, that's kind of an inside joke the bayou... about 15 minutes by bayou on foot!

SM: Patrick, what about you?

PJ: Oh I lived probably about a 20 minute car ride, 30 minutes by traffic due south in what was then the Astrodome.

SM: Okay, Ms. Meg?

MT: I grew up in Pasadena, Texas and it took about 30 minutes. It wasn't too far.

SM: Okay Jermayn?

JM: We actually at George and I we grew up across the street from one another so we pretty much car pooled back and forth and you just missed my sisters but they just walked in as well but we pretty much, you know we either caught the bus 30 minutes into town or we all had parents going back and forth the park.

SM: So we are joined now by Hillary Mack and Rachelle is that?

RM: It's Rachelle.

SM: Okay.

RM: And Darvita. She's going to hide today.

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SM: Darvita you can come around come behind us I think that's probably the easiest way.

LT: We don't bite Darvita.

SM: There's a chair right here next to Mr. Jefferson. Thanks! So ladies if you would do me a favor and state your first and last name, where you live now and your occupation that would be great.

RM: My name is Rachelle Mack. I live in Atlanta, Georgia and I am a financial analyst for G.E.

DM: My name is Darvita Mack Hall. I live in Houston and I am a Real Estate Broker.

SM: Okay, hi sir! There's a chair over here. Yes sir. This would be Mr. Leon Holder is that right?

LB: Leon Belcher.

SM: Belcher I'm sorry.

LB: Dr. Belcher.

SM: Dr. Belcher! Alright.

LB: Put a handle on that.

SM: Well Dr. Belcher would you do me a favor please since you have just joined us state your first and last name, your occupation and where you live.

LB: My name is Leon Belcher. My occupation is I am a podiatrist and I live here in Houston, Texas.

SM: Thank you very much! We had just started this interview so you haven't missed very much and we are talking about things like how far everybody had to travel to get to MacGregor Park and it seems like you all had really quite a trip to get there, you know

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for your parents to take you and go home and come back and get you later and go home again. So I imagine you spent a lot of time at the park once they dropped you off you were there for a good bit of the day. Had you gone to MacGregor Park very much for other recreational opportunities before you joined the tennis program or were you using other parks closer to your home?

LT: I had, one of my neighbors was the lifeguard at the pool. So I would hang around the park and go in to swim and then go over to the tennis court to see what they were doing and then go back to swimming. So I did spend quite a bit of time in the park, you know, at the swimming pool just because luckily my neighbor was a lifeguard there.

SM: Okay.

LT: So then I would venture over and this was before John actually got to MacGregor Park. It was Lee Leclair was there and he would hit me a few balls, I'd pick them up. He'd give me an ice cream or hit me a few balls because he was left handed and I was left handed. "Come on lefty! Hit a couple." You know then I'd hit two balls and get some ice cream and run back to the pool!

SM: What about the rest of you, was the tennis program really the first time you started spending a lot of time at the park as a kid?

DM: Yes.

PJ: Yes. Yeah it was the tennis courts first and you know if we were taking a break we might you know walk around and say, "Hey there's a salon, there's a pool, there's baseball." But it was most definitely the tennis courts first.

MT: My scenario is a little bit different because I came to MacGregor through a recommendation of another tennis player. So I was, I didn't live on that side of town. I

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didn't live in the city we lived in Pasadena so there was MacGregor and John really had a great reputation for coaching tennis. So I came to the park hoping that some of that would wear off on me. And it did like it or not! So...

SM: Well that leads to our next question. How did you become involved with the program? George why don't you start?

GK: It started with me by looking out of my window and I would see my neighbors Darvita, Jermayn... Rachelle I don't even think you were born. You may have been a little bitty baby and their other brother Hiller but I would always see them coming and going in these shorts and tennis rackets. And I just said, one day I tell my mom, "I'm going to ask what they are doing." They said, "Well we are playing tennis. We are playing at MacGregor Park. Why don't you come on out?" And I went out one day and you know John said, "Go out there and hit some balls." And next thing I know he's talking to my mom and I get, "Well if you want to continue to come out, come on out." So the rest is history.

SM: Great so the Macks got you into it!

JM: We actually got tricked into it! We actually started off at we used to go to Herman Park my mom used to play with one of her friends. Her friends used to go out to MacGregor Park and play.

SM: For tennis right?

JM: For tennis right. And so you know she saw us play at Hermann Park and she said, well, "Hey you know they have this program at MacGregor Park. Why don't you bring your kids out?" She was talking to our mom. She said, "Why don't you bring your kids

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out to play?" So we figured we were just going to play and 24, 25 years later we stayed there. So it was a good experience.

LT: This is going to date me. I'm the elder statesman of everyone here. I first met John at Texas Southern University while he was still in college before he actually got to MacGregor. I guess I was a street urchin. I would go from MacGregor Park to TSU to the YMCA and I've met John and the tennis team because I would go and wake them up every morning and bang on their suite door and they had two rooms of nothing but tennis players, the TSU tennis team. I'd go and I'd hang around and watch them practice and then in between times he would hit me a few balls. He would hit me a few balls and I'd just watch again, hit a few balls and then I'd run down to the Y and come back to TSU, you know I actually met him, like I said before he got to MacGregor, at Texas Southern and there were a couple of others that would come by and sometimes hit. So I mean it was just like I fell into it. I had another, one of my best friends his dad played tournaments in like 45's, my uncle played a little bit to I had a number of people that were kind of connected to tennis and I think I met Leon and his brother Kelvin at Rice. We entered like a summer program and I met them and they were playing so it was just like for some reason, kind of like death or fate everywhere I met I met someone I knew someone that was playing tennis. So as George says, the rest is history.

SM: Dr. Belcher how about you, how did you get involved?

LB: Well my brother as Larry was saying my brother and I, I believe we were out swimming at the pool and we just wandered over there, saw some tennis balls. We started picking up tennis balls and throwing them back on the court to that gentleman right there Mr. John Wilkerson and John said, "Why don't you all come on out and play?"

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JW: I'm sorry I'm late and I will sit down somewhere.

SM: The Chairman of the Board has arrived. Come over here John.

JW: It's like we stepped back in a time capsule!

SM: John you have to come over here. You need to be close to the microphone.

RM: You see the reoccurring theme right? Stepped over to the tennis courts...

Laughter

RM: We wandered over the first day.

MT: John you don't look a day over 25!

JW: Excuse me again for being late people I'm sorry. Hold on while I get my excuses!

SM: So John Wilkerson has joined us, the founder and coach of the MacGregor Park Tennis Program, and we are talking about how all of these folks became involved with your program and it sounds like the common theme is they made the mistake of walking over to the tennis court...

JW: They make that mistake they pay for it!

SM: And then they were ensnared in your trap!

JW: Yes that's true. I got introduced to tennis real late, 16 years of age and I thought I was a tremendous baseball player. In fact I was contacted by the Dodgers and the Indians. They wanted me to come to their camp, tryout camp. And I was a good basketball player and I picked up a racquet at 16 and that's when it was love at first sight. I didn't plan any of this it was all ordained by God, believe it or not. As a matter of fact everything I did was in man's eyesight was wrong. But he directed everything I did. It's

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a long story I won't go through it but when I picked up a racquet I thought that everybody should experience it. It was the best experience of my life.

SM: And I'm actually going to talk to you separately after I get done with all of these folks so I can hear your story.

JW: Okay. These guys are all my story!

SM: Yes, indeed! Well all they have been telling so far is horrible lies about how awful you were!

Laughter

SM: Well this is a great segue to ask about the program itself. Now this was a year round program. What was your training regimen like?

LB: Every minute.

SM: During the school year and in the summer?

LT: Run, run and run more. What we did is we had a generally everyone would get there around 4:00 during the school year and we, if we were lucky we left around 7:00, 7:30. During the summer time we would get there...

RM: 7:00 ish..

LT: Sunup to sun down. You know we'd be there all day you know we were really a family.

LB: Yeah.

PJ: Yes.

LT: A family because we ate together, we argued together, we smiled together, we cried together.

LB: Fought together.

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LT: We fought together, we did everything together. We were literally a family and we'd be there every day.

LB: We still are a family.

LT: That's right.

GK: You asked about the training regimen I just remember in the summers you know getting there at 7:00 and the first thing you do is you lace up your jogging shoes and you run about what 3 miles?

RM: Unless you got there at 7:01...

GK: Exactly then you had to run six!

JW: Young man named Edgar Allen.

GK: That's right and then we would practice all day long from 8:00 to...

JW: 5:00...

GK: 5:00.

JW: 6:00.

GK: And then we had to do one more thing before we went home. We had to run again!

LB: Three more miles.

MT: Specifically I remember this so we'd get there and I'd you know come in and it would be so humid because it's Houston summer so the first thing you would do was you would go out and run and man, I've got a long day ahead of me. But then we would do training, we'd do drills and then we would go, by that time, I mean we would drill for two or three hours. Maybe play, we'd hit a lot. John was a big advocate for get on the

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court and hit. We would hit for an hour and I'd get bored of it. I can remember, "John can I please?" "No you need to keep hitting!" The backboard was your friend.

JW: That's right.

MT: So we would do that, we would go to lunch, walk down to the Whataburger or Luby's or whatever and we would bring our racquets with us. That was our thing and then we'd get back and we'd play matches in the afternoon. And I remember the funnest,[sic] some of, the funnest [sic] stuff was playing those doubles matches and watching John and the older kids because I was at that time a younger kid (not so much anymore) but watching the big kids play mixed and play doubles it was fun. It was a lot of fun and then we would go run! So just when you thought it was done you would go run! So really but I can remember that very vividly!

JM: I remember running more than playing tennis!

Laughter

JM: Maybe because I was always late! But we ran a lot. And the true reality of it is I think it paid off in the future because now, you know, we ran then because not necessarily because we wanted to but because we had to. And now we run, not because we want to but because you feel like you are obligated to. So it is something that really paid off in the future for a lot of us as you see most of us still work out on a regular basis and I think I really contribute tennis to that.

MT: Nobody also was going to beat us on the court from our, by the fact that we were tired. We weren't going to be tired and that was one thing if we were going to lose a tennis match it was just going to be because hopefully because the person was better than we were but we were not going to lose based on a... not being in shape.

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LB: Not being in shape.

MT: That's right.

LT: I think that was one of the foundations, I was running five days...

GK: If you did lose from not being in shape you ran more!

MT: I've got to say something thought I remember that George used to get cramps a lot.

GK: That's right.

MT: Do you remember that? You've got to remember that and that had to have been ugh! He would still have he would cramp and I think you still had to go run after you got done with all that stuff.

GK: There wasn't a way out man!

Laughter

PJ: I think one of the reasons I'm immune to the heat now is because we were doing all that long distance running and then we would come back and I remember you know watching the older guys, we would all do sprints. So we were excited to see how fast the older guys could run and you know we could never match them but this was after we were playing tennis after we had ran in the morning so now we are running again in the middle of the day and then we are coming back doing sprints, to look forward to going back and hitting and then that's not talking about the drills, walking on the court in a squat position.

LT: That's right.

PJ: Tough walks!

LB: Tough walks!

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JW: I was so fortunate to have people around me. Coach Edgar came in late. We had Scottie. We even had Ron Sampos. A few more guys we were all on the same team and we had the same mindset and what we tried to do was to create a very positive environment, you are still a product of your environment. So we created a very positive environment, an environment where everybody could love everybody. Everybody could work together and everybody could push everybody and they did a good job of that. And again whatever I did or whatever the coaches did it couldn't have been done unless we had people like these people around. They... we couldn't do nothing if they said they weren't going to do it what could we do? But they voted in on it and that was a good part about it.

MT: I don't know you could do some stuff!

LB: You had a way of influencing us.

RM: I will say the flip side to all of that when you talk about the regimen and how hard it was, for me as an adult I take all of that with me. You taught us discipline, you taught us responsibility, you taught us accountability and so everything that I do is a result of that program. I just remember, like you said, you know we had to be there at 7:00, if we were there at 7:01 there was no excuse. You can't say, "Oh my mom didn't get out of the bed." "You told your mom that you needed to be here at 7:00 she would get you..." so that gave you accountability and so I take that on to this day or the big thing to remember, running the course. "Don't cut those corners!" And even today whether it's work, whether it's working out, whenever I want to stop or not give that 100% I always think, "Don't cut those corners!"

LB: Go the full way!

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RM: I actually think about all that stuff. “Don’t cut those corners.”

LT: You know I think another thing like John mentioned there were other guys who Edgar only came on a little later and because of him, he saw another revolution and that was our eating, our diet and a lot of our physical working out. And to this day a lot of the things like, he used to be like, “You don’t need ketchup when you eat.” “I’d say how can I eat French fries without ketchup? They were made for one another.”

RM: No pop!

LT: No soda! So a lot of these things I don’t do today and I think back to that as, “I don’t need to eat, I can have fries without ketchup.” I don’t need salt. You know some people reach for the salt before they even taste it. I don’t even eat salt!

JM: I don’t either. Actually some of the stuff I do now I’m [REDACTED]. (20:47)

SM: What other lessons have you all learned and taken with you as adults from the program?

JW: Before we answer that can I say one thing? Everybody talked about the tennis program they speak of seeing Zina they speak of Lori and even Kelvin but I was talking, I talked twice this week I tell them that is not the success of the story. The success of the story is these guys here who are lawyers, doctors, professionals. People don’t hear about that. That’s what it’s all about.

SM: And that’s really why we are here tonight honestly, to tell your story.

PJ: Yeah so that training regimen was huge like Rachelle, Shelley. It was huge because I don’t know it was taken for granted but it just teaches you what hard work looks like. We might be talking physically or mental toughness but learning that at such an early age, you know it’s not until like decades later that I appreciate it in hindsight

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because I'm seeing a whole generation of say students and teachers complaining about those sorts of things. You know, "If I could just teach them what hard work looks like."

You know classes would be much easier. And to think that we got it, maybe not necessarily intentionally but it got drilled into me such that I don't know I can name like instances later on where I was under the gun, under pressure or whatever and just remember, keep running the bayou Patrick.

SM: Did you all have to keep your grades up to participate as well?

LB: Not necessarily.

JW: We didn't demand grades. We knew if they were good people if they were good students, if they obeyed, the grades automatic, that's automatic. But if anybody is rebellious you know their grades was bad it was automatic. It goes hand and hand. Good training, good conditioning, being disciplined. The grades fall in line. Nowadays in our society we don't put enough emphasis on people being disciplined, people being courteous. Even now my kids have to do three things a day that is helping other people.

It doesn't help yourself it's like opening a door or at a grocery store taking a cart back, picking up things for people if they drop it. They have to do that and they may lie but they tell me three things! That just teaches you to be a good person!

RM: And the other thing y'all taught us was being responsible for each other. So you might not have said, "Make good grades." But when everyone else was making good grades around you, you want to keep up. That's encouragement itself.

LT: There is one other component that I think it really helped us and I know for myself to give back which is such a big deal in any community. So what he would do is he would have, if you were a little more accomplished you would help the ones that were

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not as accomplished. So he had a pyramid or a filtration system where the top would help the bottom. So in that way you know everyone, you would be giving back since you knew a little more it's like a mentoring. You know you would help a particular person but you would be out there helping the younger ones who were coming under you. So subconsciously what that was doing...

MT: Remember when the 10,000 kids showed up in the summertime? There was a free program...

RM: I was about to say, they didn't necessarily have to be younger. John had me out there at 8:00 trying to teach 15 to 16 year olds. They were trying to listen to me. It was torture.

MT: So there was the discipline that was so many times on my life I've fallen back on that. There hasn't been a time when I just felt like I couldn't do something and I wouldn't think about how am I going to do that "round robin" thing around the park and try to pass all those guys in the line! And you know, running for me was a challenge as you know it was just a hard thing for me. But then besides the mental and the physical side of it which I always leaned on, you know one thing John taught, at least I know this for me, was he said, "You know you need to come off the court and somebody needs to know that you are a champion whether you won or lost." And that was huge for me because I was not a good loser. I hated to lose!

GK: You can say that again!

MT: I hated to lose so it made me realize in life, you know you don't always win in life so being able to not tell if somebody comes off the court and has won or lost that was a hard thing that was one of the best things that I learned.

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JW: Well I do know that, and I still say it today, that winning or losing is not a score. That you went out there and you did your best and I do know of these people that I had around me if they did their best they were going to come out a winner, they would come out ahead most of the time. That is the man thing just going out there and doing your best. That's all. My grandma used to tell me, "If you do your best the angels in Heaven can do no better." That's all I can ask for anyone. And these guys did a darn good job of it. I remember one time in Florida, was that? We went to eat and Leon was playing a match and we were going to eat Leon...

Laughter!

JW: I'm not going to tell the rest of it. But Leon beat us to the restaurant! Leon wasn't going to let us leave him!

PJ: I forgot about that!

RM: Speaking of not breaking somewhere remember to run until you get tired and then I forgot it was like 30 degrees.

JW: Are you talking about taking care of the little at that time. Shelley was the youngest in our group and they protected her like everybody else. She was everybody's little sister. But she was running one time. Do you remember that time? We were running in the park and for some reason she wasn't watching her way. She was going and she ran over a log and did a summersault.

RM: Oh the bench!

JW: Got up and kept running!

RM: You had me with Zina and Lori and I was trying to keep up and I was delirious because they were running so fast and this bench was in front of me and I'm like,

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“Whatever” so I was too tired to go around and I flipped over but again I can’t get up and cry of course I had to keep running because that would have been an excuse why you didn’t keep up.

JW: I do think we could sit here all evening telling stories.

RM: We could tell stories.

JW: Those were for me and I hope it was for everybody else, those were the best times ever for me. I will never forget them as long as I live. That was tremendous!

JM: If you take any word away from here I think the key word is discipline. I think that the discipline part of it, it carried over to the professional life. You know when we talked about the commitment, the accountability and everything I think it was the discipline that was taught at an early age that you just did it. It wasn’t like you felt like you had to do it. It was something that you did unconsciously.

MT: But I think the discipline was also about truly, you felt like John, Ed, Scotty cared about you. It wasn’t a discipline it was something that was truly cared about you. You know make you a better person. Push you more than you thought you could pushed, so it was about that, you know make you better.

RM: And unlike a lot of them today, there was never any yelling, never.

GK: That’s right.

RM: You know some people yell to get their results, they never yelled.

LT: Never yelled and part of that, that discipline is that I believe that John had a funny way of getting into people’s heads. You know he puts people in situations and kind of see how they react and you know a lot of times he said, a lot of times he’d say, “If you quit on that, you’ll quit on life!” And here in the present I’m thinking “What?” You

know sometimes he speaks in these parables and I knew there was no halo over his head but...he speaks in these parables and he would say, "You quit on that..." "What does the egg and the racquet have to do with each other" and he'd come up with something. And you were like, "What?" Then later on you'd think okay this is what he means. You'd go back and ask him, "John, is this what you meant?" He said, "I just wanted to see how you were going to react. I wanted to see how that person would come out on the other side" and I think that influenced me a lot too. You know putting people in situations to see if they, you know you can take that over like Jermayn said to any other part of your life, how you react in situations, running the bayou, "If you quit on the bayou you'll quit on life." If you don't try really hard, you know try your hardest like Shelley said, "If you fall you have to get up, keep on going." So I think that was one of the major things also is that, you know, is that your mind, your mindset.

JW: What I wanted to accomplish more than anything, when the smoke clears or the dust settles that we developed good people and we developed good citizens. We developed good parents. That's the main thing. If they do that then they pass it on to their kids and so far it looks like we did a pretty good job. Everybody had to do this together and I think we've done a darn good job. I really, and this is like the icing on the cake tonight. I was so surprised when I came in! Pleasantly!

MT: Tennis was the byproduct. I mean there were some incredible tennis players at MacGregor Park. I mean there was everybody in this room was an incredible tennis player in their own right. You know you had Zina and Lori but everyone else was in the top in the state and some in the country, just incredible athletes.

JM: A couple of full scholarships.

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MT: You know it allowed for so much and again the, what ended up happening at the end of the day after all of that that went on is you had this result of good people that had good values and a good balance of life and ended up being pretty darn good tennis players.

JM: One of the things we didn't talk about was actually I would say the majority of the folks in the front row actually got full scholarships in tennis. Whether it was a large university or a small university it paid. It paid for their education which I think now, I tried to get my daughter... but that was key. I mean, again, you look back and you don't really think about it back then but now, I mean that's a lot. That's huge!

JW: I think your daughter speaking Spanish? ____ . (31.26) She got talent!

JM: Yeah.

SM: So once you were in whether you were very young or maybe you joined when you were 10 or 11 or so did everyone stay in through high school? I mean was it pretty much once you were in and had made that commitment you stuck it out?

LB: You were in it for life yeah.

RM: Yeah I mean it was family so you can't just leave family. I mean that's what it was and it was fun. It wasn't like we went there dreading, well maybe the running. We dreaded it but I mean we were... that was something that we wanted to do every day.

JW: But let me say this, every day just about I run across people who have told me they were in the program. I don't remember them but it was such, that kind of a program we had so many kids and everybody, to me if they came one week or one month they said they were in the program. But let me tell you something this one incident that happened to me last month. I went to a place where I get breakfast and the guy in charge eventually

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I came in to make my order and he came over, "John Wilkerson!" I said, "How are you doing?" "You don't remember me?" "No." He told me his name and I didn't remember. He stopped and said, "This guy meant so much to me!" He told everybody. I went to pay for my order and, "No you don't ever have to pay when you come in here." That was very interesting to me. That guy but he told everybody that I meant so much to him but I didn't remember him!

MT: There were people that came through the program. I wasn't there the whole time but that was so impactful on my life. I didn't have to be there "the whole time." It didn't matter because I feel like I'm a part of it even though I wasn't there but T.J. Middleton came through and if he hadn't met Lori they wouldn't have played, they played in the U.S. Open and other tournaments... Wimbledon I mean there were people that came through the program, there are people that were friends, some of my friends that came through and that were there for a little while. I'm sure they gained something from it. So, you know I think in the community, the impact on the community again, I can remember in the summer just these and it felt like 10,000 people would ascend upon the park and we would have to figure out how to do, you know ready position, pivots, swing... that was grained into us because we were trying to teach.

JW: Meg, Meg was a fighter. Meg didn't back down to anyone did you?

MT: No.

JW: And she had that heart of a lion but the thing that I liked about the park was there were a lot of bad characters in the park, basketball court and around the swimming pool. But they respected our kids so we had to go through that to run the bayou but we would

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come through there they would be quiet, they would be respectful. And that's one thing that I do like about that park. They respected our program, they respected the kids.

JM: Criss-cross.

Laughter

JW: We could sit here all night we have so many stories.

GK: Steph you asked did we stay and watch, the only thing I will compare it to is I mean most of us at the table here have kids that are in sports and sometimes it's the challenge to want to get them to practice, get them ready for a game. When we were coming up in the program there was no parent I don't think that had to push us or ask us...

LB: We had to train our parents.

LT: Yeah right!

GK: ...so we were always ready to go. There was never not a desire to get there and you know unlike, kind of like Meg I did leave for a year or so but I came back as quickly as I could, because where I went, just wasn't the same.

PJ: I might be a bit of an exception. I came through the program through birth. My father played doubles with John and some point and he was always at the tennis court so of course he's dragging his little son. So eventually one or two summers there you know I'm in the program. So I wasn't there for life but I was always at MacGregor Park with my father. So you know I was there for a lifetime, although not necessarily in the program for life.

LT: And I definitely feel when I went to college, my college was based on my college coach was from John's hometown. So I saw that as an extension of, I saw that as an

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extension of John and then I'd come back home, you know and it's like, you know nothing ever stopped, same regimen summer after summer all through college and you know I think you know it's like you said it's like Good Fellows once you're in that's it. You know you've done your time and you don't have a button or pin but everyone knows the family members and say, "Hey where's Jermayn?" or "Hey where's Leon?" "What about Meg what is she doing?" So it's like for life we kind of check on each other in different periods no matter how long or short that period may be. You still are connected, that camaraderie never ever leaves.

SM: Do you all still play tennis?

MT: I do when I can. I did for a while. I've got three young kids so not so much now but I actually stopped playing for a while and went back and played. Now I just love it. I love it more, I mean there's a time I think when you compete at the level we compete at where you get burned out and you kind of stopped liking it for the sport that it is. But now I can go out on the court and nothing like hitting the solid ball or hitting a great serve. It just feels right. It's like where people talk about golf.

JM: I think you watch it a lot more though because I think what happens and I think it happens in any sport that you played at a competitive level for so long that when you do decide to play you can't just enjoy. It's kind of like you think I'm competitive. I will give you a prime example and I probably getting everyone to take a laugh at this. But my brother and I we decided one year to see, to stop playing tennis for like 6 or 7 years. It might have been longer than that. But anyway we decided to practice and to play in the Houston Open which is a pretty big tournament here. And I, I guess I was about 35 at the time and so we decided to play in the championship series which you know...college. We

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were playing and we were practicing well I mean we played doubles every weekend.

Anyway so I played I drew this guy who plays at Oklahoma State and I went to toss I serve and I win the first game. I'm like, "Wow this is easy!" I lost 1 and 0 real bad. I mean no matter what I did I couldn't do it. So at that time I said, "You know what this is not..." but you get competitive so it's kind of tough to really but I still enjoy watching it. Like we watched it this past weekend and so forth but we still have some indirect contact with them.

JW: I basically look at tennis as a means to get you from one place to the other. It's like an airplane. You know there's people flying a plane they get you there quickly but when that plane lands to get you to that gate everybody wants to get off that plane. So tennis can get you a scholarship. It can get you to know people. It can get you to stay in shape. You understand? Rather than going to a happy hour at a club like some people do, you can go out and play tennis too.

RM: Go back to what Larry said earlier about John playing these mind games with you.

JW: Uh oh!

RM: I remember John it was about a year or two ago that came to Atlanta? So I hit some balls at his kids. He was like, "Shelly you still got it. You should get back out there on the court! You're still looking good, great!" So I decided that, I got back on the court. I played league and I started running like I was taught and here I am two knee surgeries later and I haven't been able to get back on the court yet but I'm looking forward to it when I can.

JW: How are the knees doing?

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RM: I'm still recovering!

MT: Well I lowered my expectations but I've actually learned how to enjoy the game and you know that's what to me, I can go and enjoy the game and that's a big deal to be able to have to have to play that competitively and to have it mean so much. To go out and just hit the ball and enjoy it with whatever players you are playing with. Of course I'm going to be competitive about it. But then I'll go, "Come on really...I mean this isn't what I do anymore."

JM: I will say this now, the amazing part about it is that it helps you in other sports.

LT: Yes it does.

MT: Oh sure.

JM: Because and again we play, most of us play golf now and just the hand-eye coordination, hitting the ball, you know racquetball I mean a lot of it has got to do with us playing tennis. Because it's easier for me to pick it up versus some of my peers who never played tennis.

MT: I will say I played in a mom's softball league. They didn't know who I was. I mean not like they would know who I was but I got out there and I hit an in the park grand slam. I was throwing the lady out at home. The other teams, women had been practicing all week and I was just doing it. I wasn't paying attention. They were commenting, "Well push her over when you run past her!" I'm telling you my competitiveness came out. I was like, I was on fire! I can do this. But then I let it go. I'm like, "Okay let it go."

LT: I happen to work at a school and my kids, I brought them a couple of times to see John. So what I did, I had all of my trophies, I took them to school and put them on the

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desk. And they said, "Coach, where did all these trophies come from?" I said, "Those are my trophies." "You won all of these?" I said, "Yes and you can too!" and they were just like so...

JW: You got them excited!

LT: ...so I got them excited! So now I think the last actual tournament I played was '99 but I tell them I don't have anything to prove. I do play with some people on some Sundays and believe it or not these people are fairly competitive, one of them travels around playing in tournaments in her age division. You know so they are fairly competitive...

JW: ... Larry plays in Galveston. These people have beautiful homes right by the water there. They have a grass court and a hard court in their front yard and it's a beautiful place and they bring you over there and they will just feed you and everything you want. It's a beautiful setting.

MT: That's a far cry from the park wasn't it?

JW: It is a tremendous... and at least once a year they invite our kids up.

LT: Right.

JW: And they have a good time. It's beautiful. So he hobnobs with the right people!

SM: Well looking back now as adults what effect do you think the tennis program had on the community as a whole. I mean here in Houston, this was a big deal for a very, very long time and obviously made a huge impact on many, many people's lives. What are your thoughts there?

JW: Before they answer that one let me say this: we had problems there because our program was free and the kids didn't pay but we had some of the best coaches that you

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are going to find anywhere. So when we go to tournaments and play other kids who are paying like \$250 at that time, \$300 a month and our kids were beating them and the parents would talk to our parents and say, "Where do you play? How much do you pay?" That would cause a problem. And that's what I must say it did cause a problem and it eventually lead to me being given a raise, giving me a higher position but out at the park. They gave me an office position.

RM: I mean the effect on the community, the biggest thing that you are going to see is the Zina Garrison foundation. If it wasn't for you know MacGregor Park there wouldn't be a Zina Garrison Foundation now to teach you know free tennis at how many parks are there? I don't know.

JW: We had three. We've only got one right now. Again, again like I said before, for what we give kids very few people can pay for and I do think that if you don't have the money, money should not be an obstacle. If you've got a talent and you want to play the game I think you should be able to play it and have access to it. And that's what we do.

And most of the programs in Houston, they will let anybody teach tennis. You don't have to know tennis. You can just teach, but it's not fair to the kid. It's like you sending your kid to a school and they've got a teacher that just first time teaching. That's not fair. You get a bad start and that's what I think... I'm going to say this and I'll stop, if you start Tennis you should have the best teacher in the world when you start. Like in school in the first grade they should have some of the professors from college in the first grade. You shouldn't have a teacher learning at the expense of a kid. That's why we do what we do.

LB: Good answer.

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MT: I think the community, the community and I don't... I look at the... I'm driving by MacGregor Park it's a little sad to drive by now because it doesn't, maybe it's because you are older and everything seems smaller we talked about that then everything else. But it had to have a huge impact on the community. People knew what was happening at the park. You know, again the students, kids that were involved were going out and doing something in Tennis, you know winning tournaments. I think it had to bring in a lot of socioeconomic to that area and maybe it was already like that at the time. I'm not sure because I didn't live there. But and then you know here you see John in Wimbledon and I can remember watching TV and seeing John with your hair, remember? And I think they mentioned MacGregor Park.

JW: They did.

MT: On, you know so the accolades that MacGregor got, MacGregor Park got due to that program were huge.

GK: Just a different perspective as far as impact on the community. When you look at the impact it had then and how many lives it saved from, you know, being in places where they shouldn't have been. I'm talking about kids staying out of trouble. You know, we look at (I look at the program) and for me it was a place to go where if I didn't have that place to go there's no telling where I would have ended up. You know a lot of our friends in the neighborhood they ran the streets and they still have never left the neighborhood. We, on the other hand, when you listen to what John said earlier, we had a place to go. We developed a lot of lifelong characteristics that have paid dividends in our professional lives and without that program it's no telling where a lot of us men would have ended up.

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JM: Yes that's...

GK: ...Not to be sexist or anything but let's face it if you look at the statistics we were at a high risk.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

GK: ...growing up and without that I think it saved a lot of lives.

MT: There was a lot of other influences.

JM: Actually it was a lot of exposure. We, you know, when you talk about it at that time, you know, you didn't really have a lot of blacks playing tennis. It was one of those things where, you know, we traveled to places where we were the only ones. And I mean of course we were too young to understand at the time but I think from the exposure, you know it had a lot to do with us, again, us being able to deal with the community at that now from an early age. You know, it's kind of like to me it's kind of like it reminds me a lot of golf now in a sense. You know where golf is now getting a lot of exposure to the minority people, you know. At that time we were being exposed even though we didn't know this. We were being exposed to a totally different world. We used to travel. We used to travel to ATA Nationals at one of the...

LB: San Diego.

JM: ...I mean we lived to go to the ATA Nationals. I mean you talk about travel we traveled, you know at a young age we traveled the country.

PJ: For instance San Diego. We got a lot of travel. The exposure was both ways because not only were we getting exposed in areas we weren't used to seeing but also like I remember like going to certain country clubs where like you said you are the only ones and we are the only ones. The outside world was getting exposure.

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LT: Absolutely.

PJ: The exposure is both ways and the ATA Nationals...

LT: Oh man...

PJ: ... I remember people were asking, "Where are you from?" They said, "If someone says Houston one more time... I'm tired of you all taking all the trophies." So that wasn't me winning that was these guys.

JM: That was a totally different interview. That's...

JW: Larry was the first Junior Champion, Black Junior Champion here in Houston, Larry was. He was tremendous player.

LT: And I told him we did meet in college. I wasn't there in college but you know the story!

SM: For the purposes of this videotape we should say that the ATA is the American Tennis Association.

LT: Yes.

SM: And that that was the African American Tennis Association started back in the 20's I think.

LT: Right.

SM: To give black people a chance to learn and play and compete.

JW: Yes they weren't allowed to play in the USTA tournaments. So they formed their own association. And Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe all these others, Zina Garrison all these guys came up through that. It helped tremendously. It gave us a lot of exposure.

LT: And I don't think the community even though they knew that that was something special going on at the time, you know with the MacGregor Park the junior program, I

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think as it advanced and people, you know, Lori and Zina started playing and you know getting the little pub in the newspaper and I think it was Meg said, John being seen on television at Wimbledon saying, "Hey they came from the public parks of Houston, Texas, Memorial Park." I think then the community began to have a paradigm shift that, "Hey maybe I can get my kid in that and maybe some of that will rub off, you know on them." When John was just trying to make better people, you know I think the community once Zina and Lori got rolling and started to get some publicity they began to really appreciate what was going on at the park, only after...

MT: Oh yeah I agree with that.

LT: ... some of the bigger stuff. Because at first you know people were calling, "Oh you had those kids running the morning and you had those kids running in the evening you all are crazy out there!"

JW: Understand one thing, that park was so popular during the Dallas Cowboys heydays we had these fundraisers. Those Dallas Cowboys would be there. Frank O'Hara, the Pittsburgh Steelers would be there.

MT: I played tennis with Cathryn Murphy.

RM: Earl Campbell.

JW: Arthur Ashe came down. Bill Cosby came there. Joe Morgan. There were so many people that had to come there. This program was so popular. These guys was the reason for it. It was tremendous. Those were some of the best days ever. That brought back a lot of memories. You never can forget those memories.

PJ: And then one of the most subtle but significant ways mentorship has to be talked about, so with John and other coaches instilling discipline and toughness and you know

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teaching tennis, it carried over because now if you had to ask me why it is that I seem to just naturally gravitate to being a mentor to nieces, nephews, younger cousins and they gravitate towards me and I'm able to motivate them when their parents aren't is because I got that example from somewhere. You know it didn't materialize out of thin air. And MacGregor Park is a large, you know... so you are going to say family and genetics and you know just the force of your own being, you know has to be responsible for a lot but you know I would be remiss not to say MacGregor Park amplified it significantly.

SM: Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like to share before we wrap up?

LB: I've got a comment. The lessons we learned in tennis became the lessons we needed for life.

JM: Well said.

JW: Let me tell you one of the ATA's we went to in San Diego and it will always stand out. We left here about midnight going to San Diego on a bus and we got to San Diego maybe a day later and we pull up to the stadium where we are going to be playing. We go inside we got about 45 people on the bus. One person's name was not on the draw sheet, Lori McNeil and we know she sent it in because they got Zina's in and Lori played together they sent theirs in together. They said, "Well she didn't send it in." "You sure?" "No she didn't send it in." "No she sent it in." Edgar went and them guys, the kids had gotten off the bus after all that riding, Edgar said, "Get back on the bus we're going back to Houston." Those kids didn't... they just got right back on that bus and the bus driver fired it up and they ran out of there, "No wait, wait, wait..." But it impressed me so nobody complained at all. They got right back on that bus, that always stand out in my mind.

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JM: 1974...

JW: Because I was looking at Edgar, "Are you sure?"

SM: All for one, one for all.

MT: I also just I have to add you know it just really a special, amazing place, time, group of people. I wish we could have that today. I don't think you can duplicate it.

Because as John said, he started out just trying to make people better. If you got caught up in the web of walking over, you know, I was again an exception but if you got caught up in the web of walking over to the courts, he was going to give you a reason to stick around and you wanted to. From everything I heard you wanted to. And then as this thing became, you know, evolved and grew and blossomed and it got some local attention, national attention and worldwide attention, everybody started looking at this and going, "Wow this is incredible." But it was always incredible. The point is that it didn't start out I don't think John started out to be... to be a national phenomenon. It just ended up, you know.

JW: I knew I couldn't develop somebody to play like Chris Everett. I couldn't develop somebody to play like Billy Jean King. I bet they want to be champions I just knew that and let me tell you this. I didn't start out to develop any kind of champion. I just wanted to develop some good tennis players and Zina and Lori, those guys had gotten so good. I knew nothing about national tournaments. And one of the coaches asked me, "Are you going to the national tournament?" I said, "What?" "Are you going to the national tournament?" I said, "What?" He said, "Your girls are one and two, they haven't contacted you?" I said, "No, no way." I finally called the Houston Tennis Association, Texas Tennis Association and you know what their response was? "We didn't know if

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you wanted to go!" And I can go on and on from there. But my objective was just to develop good tennis players and be like a mentor, develop a good environment for the kids so they can enjoy it like I did. I wanted to give the kids my experience that's all I wanted to do.

SM: Well you obviously succeeded looking at everybody sitting around this table.

You grew some good folks here.

JM: One other thing he didn't tell you is he is a mean backgammon player.

MT: You had to bring that up I almost forgot about that!

GK: Three out of five sets.

JW: You're talking about the people I met. I've been a guest of Bill Cosby. I stayed with Barry Gardy for a whole week at his house. We were a guest at his house. I've met so many people. I had audience with the Pope. I'm not even Catholic. So many things, it's I couldn't have even planned my life like this. And I have been truly, truly blessed and I didn't do any of it. I will let you know that. I didn't do any of it. I got my exposure in tennis by filling out my first year at Prairie View at school. I went home, I'm a dummy, a friend said, "Let's join the army!" "Okay." I got to Germany, I'm a typist. I want to be a soldier. I'm out there typing a clerk, working with the General and the Colonel knocks, comes in and says, "Who is Private Wilkerson?" "That's me sir." "I see where you played tennis in college and high school." "Yep." "I need somebody to hit with me during their lunch hour." "Okay." I went and hit with him. He said, "You're pretty good." I said, "Thank you sir." He said, "I'm going to put you on the army team." "What does that mean?" "All you do is play tennis. We'll take you to the courts. We'll bring you lunch and we will pick you up in the evening." Wow. Then I got, we played

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in Germany and I had to play at the German clubs. The Germans saw me play and they wanted me on their team. So that's all I did. And they let me do it. They said it was good for German/American relations.

JM: Relations!

JW: If you know anything about tennis nowadays, God put me on those clay courts in Germany for three years and that's what you need to come up on and I got to play for three years on the clay courts. I came back, got back into college, won the national championship, qualified for the U.S. Open, and graduated in three years from Texas Southern with honors. I didn't plan any of it. Everything I did that looked wrong came out right.

SM: That's amazing.

JW: Then before I graduated, two months before I graduated, "The job is going to be yours at MacGregor Park when you graduate." I get there I'm there about six months, here comes Zina, here comes Lori, and here comes the rest of these jokers. It was planned already. I don't know if you understand what I'm saying.

PJ: Yeah we get what you are saying!

GK: We certainly hear what you are saying!

JW: And my life would be nothing if these people weren't a part of it. It wouldn't be nothing, I just can't envision my life without these people in it.

SM: What I'd like to do is go ahead and talk with John very specifically. You all are welcome to add any colorful comments or anything else that you want to share during this but I have some questions just for you sir.

JW: Okay. Oh now?

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SM: Yes. We are just going to do it right now.

JW: I can't say what I want to say with some of them in here!

Laughter

SM: So we can go ahead and take a break if you'd like to or...

JW: I'm okay. I don't know about the rest of them.

SM: It seems we are kind of on a roll.

JM: After all we told you the last hour, you think we are going to take a break!

SM: Fair enough! Fair enough. Scott, are you okay to keep rolling? Excellent!

Alright so,

SM: ... we've talked a lot about how you got started and how you came to the park.

Was there some event or some kernel of an idea that lead you to launch the tennis program? I mean what was it that made you think, "You know what I really should do is dedicate the rest of my life to teaching these kids tennis?"

JW: Well before I came to Houston and when I first picked up tennis in San Antonio when I was 16 in the summer I would go to the park there, McFarlin Park and I was doing there, I was coaching, the little kids I would organize them and get them going. They would come every day looking for it. And these kids they became coaches at, head coaches at Texas A & M, the same little kids that I worked with. But when I got to the job at MacGregor Park I was going to do what every other coach did there. The first three or four months I had a program where you paid because that's what everybody did. But I wasn't being satisfied with the pay, the kids. I got these professional kids, they didn't care about tennis, tennis was like a hobby or something they would do and I stopped it. I just said, "I'm opening it up." And as soon as I opened it up that's a month

later here come all these guys. And it's something that was already in my heart. Like I said, you asked me did I plan it? No it was already planned before I was born. All I did, I'll tell you guys some of this so you understand. When I was a kid, let me say this first. I didn't even know I was alive until I was five. If you asked me what happened to me from one through four I have no idea. I know my mother brought me to San Antonio with my step father, she had just married and when I got to San Antonio that's when I became alive. Before then I can't tell you anything. I don't know if you understand what I'm saying. So maybe, and that's what a lot of you guys are parents still, a lot of hugging. I didn't get that eventually because I stayed with my grandparents and it was in the country, it was a rough life. But God has a way of letting you not remember those things. But I was 6, 7 and 8 I would talk to God in the bed. I'd be talking to God at night and I would do it seriously. And I think that helped me a lot. And everything was in his hands. So everything that I have done has been ordained by God not by me. By God and that's all I tell the kids every day. As long as your heart is right, you can't do wrong. As long as you believe in God and your heart is right, there's no wrong you can do. That's what keeps me going and the kids around me experience that every day. I can tell you so many stories where I was in a situation but my heart was right. We take kids to tournaments, other cities and the people around us didn't tell us that only two could be in a room. We had four, they are going to make us pay for the other two. They didn't tell us that you couldn't get the tax exempt you had to go through the state. I didn't get that I just said, "Man" and they would go talk and they came back and said, "We'll let you go with it." I could have gotten angry because you didn't tell us. I didn't do that but

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everything, I can sit here all night and tell you situations where it worked out. So I didn't plan anything so I can't take credit, I wish I could. I can't.

SM: About how many kids came through your program over the years do you think?

JW: I have no idea. Right now, I'm going to tell you what, we had more then, than we do now I think. Right now every day we deal with about 500 kids in the summer.

SM: Okay.

JW: We deal with beginner kids, totally novice kids in the morning, we work with our advanced kids in the afternoon and we have about, and our coaches that we have now, they came through our program and they come back and work. And some of them work for free and some of them we do pay. We only have limited resources but we have an unlimited amount of people that give their time. It's unbelievable. Every day we pick up about two people that want to volunteer their time. We do tutoring, we do nutrition, we do whatever a kid needs to make it in life. We do it.

SM: And you are talking about at the Zina Garrison Academy?

JW: Yes I am.

SM: Okay.

JW: But I can't even begin to tell you the number of kids but I do know that right now still easily three fourths of our kids get scholarships to college.

SM: That's great!

JW: That's what keeps me going.

SM: I want to ask you a specific question about coaching Lori McNeil and Zina Garrison because in addition to coaching at the park you coached them when they began playing professionally. Did that change your involvement with the program back at the

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park? I knew you had other coaches working with you. But what was that like for you as a coach to move into that really kind of a different realm from what you had been operating in?

JW: Like I said I didn't I was very naive, I didn't say, "I want to be a professional coach." I didn't say, "I'm going to do this." I just let things come to me. I didn't try to make nothing happen. Because they always told me if you want to make God laugh tell him your plans. So I was naïve, even like I was telling you about the nationals. I didn't know they had qualified for nationals. So Zina, Zina herself was a 26th in the world as an amateur so when she turned pro she was already 26th in the world. Do you know how much money that would be nowadays? There was a player from Australia called Evonne Goolagong. The first chance I got to talk to her coach I went. I'm new at coaching. I asked him, "What does it take to be a good coach?" I wanted to know. Do you know what he told me? He said, "To be a good coach the first thing you must do is find a good player." So I was already like I got two good players, I knew Zina and Lori were good players. They were tremendous as young ladies, as good athletes. And they would listen to every word I would say and those guys would stay there like until 9:00 at night. How many nights did I get a call from Zina's mother, "Tell Zina if she don't get on that bus at 9:00 at night and come home I'm going to come up there and whoop her butt!" At that time you could get on the bus and go home. You couldn't dare do that now. But again and my problem I will tell you the highest point in my life and the lowest point was both of those girls were at one time as professionals, Zina was 4 and Lori was 8. I'm coaching both of them. That's a good position and that's a bad position. Because it started a lot of friction, they wanted to be separated. Their parents wanted them to be separate and I had

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to deal with that and that's when my problem started. But I had accomplished my goal and they had to make decisions. They made a decision and I was proud of them. They are supposed to make their own decision they are grown. It's their lives. But I had, I got more out of it, as much or more than they did. I got to travel all over the world. I can go about any place in the world and I still have got friends. And I got all this exposure. And I know a kid asked me the other day, "Coach John you're rich aren't you?" I said, "Yes I'm rich, look at all those kids out there! Each one of those kids is a million dollars!" Again, there were rough times. I'm not saying all of it was good. It was rough because dealing with when the girls became good the agents wanted them to separate and I was the one in the way because I'm being, I'm there talking real. I know because Zina got to be number 1 in the juniors at 16. The agents told Zina, told her family, "She can make \$500,000 a year." I said, "Are you kidding, she could make a million dollars a year!" He said, "You're crazy!" The agent said, "Let's get rid of John he's in the way." So that's, a lot of that happened there. I can't deny that.

SM: And they dealt with a lot of racism at tennis tournaments...?

JW: I'm sorry what?

SM: They dealt with a lot of racism at tennis tournaments too didn't they?

JW: We did, not they did. We covered them.

SM: Well, yeah.

JW: We covered them. Yes it was there. I will tell you one experience I went through. We were in Corpus and everybody knows Zina she wasn't a big girl, she was a short girl. She was strong but she was short and before the tournament, the director came up here and said, "The parents here don't think Zina is that young and we want to get a

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copy of her birth certificate.” I was pretty sharp at that time. So I said, “I can understand that” and I said, “I want a birth certificate of every kid in the tournament also.” He said, “We can’t do that.” I said, “Well why can’t you?” I said, “Do you realize what you just said? You told me that Zina, these parents are saying Zina’s mother cannot either read or that she’s cheating. That’s what you are telling me. If she had a birth certificate she would know the age of her kid.” That didn’t come up any more. But you run across things like that. As a professional we were playing... my phone don’t ring... as a professional we were in a tournament up in east somewhere but we are, Zina and Lori and all of the other players are going in the gate. We come up there and we can’t go in. We are not players. Yes we are! “Where’s your I.D.?” That’s why we are going in. Everybody else is going to get their I.D. we need to go in to get our I.D. That was like a Sunday before the tournaments started. And it took other players to come in and say, “Yes they are okay.” Those are things you run across that but it doesn’t bother you. That’s all part of you knew that. We came up like that it doesn’t and you guys you face that every day. But that’s okay, that’s part of life. But one thing you know that all people are not like that. There’s just a certain one or two like that. So I don’t wipe everybody with the same brush.

SM: On the positive side, what are some of your most memorable moments as a coach?

JW: Oh boy, I can tell you, do you remember Glen Patterson? Some of them were the same thing. Zina and Lori the first time any two black girls had met in the throws of a major tournament. We were in Florida and that was great and I thought it was great! I tried to prepare them and I said, “We’ve already accomplished our purpose. We are in the

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finals. The rest of it is just a formality. Whoever wins just congratulate the other one and we will go have dinner to make sure.” It didn’t work that way. Zina at that time was much better than Lori. Zina had won the first set, well ahead in the second set and lost that match. Wow! We didn’t have no dinner, we didn’t ride back on the plane. We always sit together. We didn’t sit together! That was a good one because they were the first two blacks to meet in a major tournament. I wasn’t there when Zina got in the finals at Wimbledon that was great. Lori the many times that she beat Steffi Graff and I was there, that was tremendous. In the championship she beat Steffi Graff. Lori owned Steffi Graff. There were so many memorable. Zina going to the nationals and winning those as a junior. Those were tremendous. I mean I can go on and on. Those were tremendous.

SM: Playing backgammon?

JW: Yeah but we went to New Jersey. There was about 35 trophies to be awarded in that tournament. I think we won 32 of them as a group, our whole group. We came away with 32 trophies out of the whole 35. We dominated that tournament as kids. So I can go on and on and tell you. I don’t know if one stands out more than the other.

SM: Okay.

RM: What about the dogs in California?

JW: Dibba dibba da?

RM: The dog in California when it jumped on your back.

JW: You tell that story, because I get angry every time... Tell the story Shelley.

RM: We were in California, my brother, my mom and John it was the nationals so we stayed at this hotel and we are walking to the room. It was a long week. It was the end

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of the week. We played at nationals. We were tired. We were walking to the room and we hear dogs barking.

JW: The dog started running at us.

RM: Right so we are standing there for a minute and then we hear the feet or the paws of the dogs and they start running and John is like, "Run!" and before he can even move I was on his back. He's like, "Get off of my back!" I was like hitting him, "Go John, go!" I'll never forget that!

JW: I've tried to.

DM: She would have got you a couple of days ago then.

RM: Yeah I got chased a couple days ago.

JW: Oh no, I'm not going to comment on that.

SM: What about the rest of you, what other memories do you have of Mr. Wilkerson that you'd like to share?

JW: I look at all these guys and I do have memories. Most of them I'm not going to share.

RM: Well you asked him about...

JW: All of these guys they are like my own kids so I do have a lot of fond memories, unbelievable. They were tremendous and just to see them here and I know I could call any of them right now and they will say, "What do you want?" They won't say, "Why?" They will say, "When do you need it?" or "What do you want?" That's what so great about this now. I don't think about what they did or didn't do. I look at them now. I don't ever look at the past I look forward. That's my speech to everybody, "Look ahead."

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Never look back, look ahead. No looking over the Pat [REDACTED] (111.19) one of the greatest guys ever to be in the program.”

SM: So looking forward for you Mr. Wilkerson, what's in the future for you?

Coaching, I know you're...

JW: I don't know if any of these guys know this but about the 18th of July Lori McNeil will be with us permanently. She's coming down and we also got plans to work with KIPS. They have given us land where we can build our own academy over there. They want us close to them and they are giving us the land and we've got the... everything already drawn up.

SM: And for the purposes of this videotape. KIP is a charter school here in Houston, very high performing school.

JW: Yeah it's tremendous. I went over there I could not believe the discipline the kids have over there and I can't wait to have to deal with those kids. We come in a room it's about 30 kids in a room. Three of us come in a room and they don't even turn around. They are busy working and the teacher does not sit at the front of the desk. He goes around to all the kids' desks and works with the kids. I went into a public speaking class when anybody get ups to speak all the kids have to point and when they get up there everybody better be pointing to that kid. That meaning I've got your attention and you've got my attention. And those things really impress me. If you see somebody in the hallway, they be going straight to their locker and straight to their class. They don't turn to look at you or anything. All those things have really impressed me. So the future looks bright for me and there's so many things you can do with this tennis it's unbelievable the things you can do with tennis and to help kids to become better people

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and this one, we started, we experimented on these kids. So I think we can do a lot better!

MT: I've got to say there was a lot of laughter too. There was a lot of somebody always playing a practical joke on somebody. There was lots of funny things that happened because you know we were all adolescents and you know just... growing up so a lot of funny things.

JW: What's the little kid we played the joke on at Atlanta?

MT: Romando.

JW: Now this little kid, one of the youngest there but he was so excited being in Atlanta with the kids and this was the day we leave we put all the bags in one room so we get ready to leave we don't have to pay for a room. So we put them in all one room. We got through and everybody like this here, we're getting ready to get out of there right and he's just running around he's just so happy playing with everybody and all of the sudden he passes out. I did something I regret today. I said, "Everybody be quiet, we got all the bags out of the room and went across the hall to another room and he's still asleep. And we call the room and he doesn't answer the phone. So we knock on the door. "What are you doing here?" He said, "Oh I'm here with my coach." He said, "Your people left about an hour and a half ago!" He said, "Oh my people have left me!" He was running down the hallway. "My people left me!" Boy he went back in the room and fell on that bed and started crying and we all came in there! I felt so bad but that showed you what he felt about this program!

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MT: I have a funny story you all will remember this one about running the courts and it was a cold day and we were running the courts and we couldn't run until for some reason what was it, we had to run until something happened.

RM: Gilette got tired.

MT: Okay and I think it was Scotty, Scotty said or maybe it was Ed said, "You guys are just being jacks!" Well as a white girl from Pasadena I didn't understand what that was. There was a lot of disconnect for a while there.

JM: We said jackass!

MT: And I said, I came around and of course, "Do you guys understand what a jack means? Does anybody here understand what a jack means?" And of course me, "oh I know?" He says, "Alright Meg, what does a jack mean?" I said, "It means you're jacking off!"

Laughter!

MT: And guess what? We didn't have to run! We got to stop! I don't guess you will remember that but I do.

JW: Some things we try to forget!

MT: So that probably doesn't need to make the video.

JW: You make sure you got that! That's about the only thing you are going to put on that!

MT: But that was the funny things that would happen you know. I didn't know.

JW: That was a whole different culture for Meg.

MT: I was twelve or thirteen. I was just trying to...

JW: Fit in.

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MT: Participate. Fit in and participate and hey we didn't have to run after that!

LT: Goal accomplished.

MT: Golly! Funny things would happen such as that.

JW: There was so many stories day in and day out and your brother here he took the cake!

MT: Yeah he did.

JW: Everything revolved around Hillary really.

LT: What about New Orleans?

MT: There's always one that's trying to get into trouble all the time.

JW: But let me tell you one thing about Hillary that really got me. During that time they had changed the balls from white to yellow and I still had a can of white balls. Well you had to take the little thing and I kept those as a memorabilia. I went to lunch one day and I came back and Hillary had those balls all over the court hitting with them! I could not believe that! I was going to be the only one who had these, look at him Michon is over there too. We can tell some stories about you too can't we Michon, Michon I got to tell this one because this stands out!

MB: Okay.

JW: Michon was going to a predominantly white school at that time and she was on the bus coming back and when they got to a corner you know the section there was a bunch of black kids that waited for that bus with rocks. Michon was, "Hey I'm black, I'm black!"

Laughter

JW: That was so funny! They got her first!

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MB: We had to write reports. We all had to write reports and you made us, it wasn't just about tennis we had to be educated. But I remember Zina and Lori came late and they didn't have to do a report and I said, "Is this a dictatorship? Why do I (I was about 13) is this a dictatorship? I thought this was democracy! Does everybody have to write a report or are they exempt from writing a report?" Whatever it was hilarious!

JW: I bet Edgar made you pay for that!

RM: That means running. That equates to 30 miles. But hey while everyone is here my nieces they play tennis. Kailer, stand up, just made super champ! This is good for Kailer she needed to hear a lot of this and in particular she asked me a question the other day. Growing up how hard did you train? What did you all do? How many miles a day did we probably run on average?

JM: Seven.

GK: At least six.

RM: And how many sprints a day? At least 100.

JW: That was the bayou. We usually sprinted...

LB: Running the court and back.

RM: Yeah twice a day. Racquet in your hand by the grip.

JW: And tell them about the hill.

RM: Oh the hill in the middle of the three miles. There's a hill you had to go up.

MT: Sometimes we did the train where the other person would come to the back and then go to the front, and those trees.

JM: You really messed up if had to run the park and the bayou.

RM: And what happened when we cried on the tennis court?

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JW: Nothing.

RM: That was more bayou! Remember John used, speaking of Joe they used to hide behind trees so you would never know.

LT: They saw you walking.

RM: You were not allowed to get upset. Bang the racquet you get in trouble. So there were what 40, 30 kids in a tournament. They can't be at all these places. So you look around. You don't see them and "Bam!" Next thing you know they are jumping out from behind the trees or somewhere and they are like, "You've been popped!" (Which meant you had to run.) So you had to see it!

JW: I'm going to tell you something most people don't understand. We are much stronger, we are much better than we think we are. That's the thing I'm saying. We don't get the most out of what we can do. We are unlimited really. And I want kids to realize that. There's nothing that you can't accomplish. If you put your mind to it and most kids nowadays, I don't know I deal with kids now and they are totally different. They don't have that incentive. You can't make them get up and compete. They will settle for second best and that's what I'm trying to get how do I deal with that now? That's what I'm trying to get past right now. They don't make them like they used to and it's not the kids it's their parents.

RM: Absolutely.

PJ: It's because the parents didn't go to MacGregor Park!

RM: Or the parents didn't... my mom they didn't even stay there and watch. They just 7:00 get out, I'm slowing down, get out!

DM: The car's still rolling!

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RM: Right exactly. "7:00 a.m. I'll see you at 7:00 p.m. bye!" You would not hear from them and they knew their kids were in good hands.

JW: Now days we work with the kids every day their parents are sitting all around. So today I told them, "Next Monday you all better bring your training clothes. I'm going to take you all out walking. We are going to get you all in shape, give you all something to do." They look forward to. So rather than put the pressure on their kids, I'm going to start getting them in shape.

LT: That's a good idea!

MT: You told me that the difference too is that kid seem... everything is pacified. "I don't care. I don't care if I win. I don't care if I lose." There's no fire. There's no...

JW: No.

RM: ...that drive.

JW: No. Not what you guys have. They don't have that.

JM: I figure it's just a domino effect. I mean if you look at the athletes today. I mean they have a tendency to feel like everything is handed to them on a platter so when they are in college or high school they are going to start playing. They feel like they don't have to work too hard. They got too much handed to them at an early age. We came up for the most part...

JW: You had to earn it.

JM: We had to work for it. And that's the problem. I think a lot of these parents you know they spoil their kids.

JW: You are not doing that are you?

JM: Absolutely not!

Laughter

JM: But that's the problem. I truly, I'm a firm believer it's the parents.

MT: Well you know is there a place now where you can drop your kid off for the whole day? Probably not, probably not, not in the same manner. So it's a little bit different too. Again, that was a special time and place with special people.

JM: Yeah because it was a family.

JW: Did anybody talk to Gigi lately? Her father is, he has got cancer, terminal. So if you get a chance to look her up. She needs...

JM: Also know his mom passed a couple of days ago.

JW: Right.

JM: They had arrangements Saturday at his house so whoever needs information I can text it to you.

SM: Is there anything else you would like to share before we wrap up. I really appreciate this. You all have been great. This is terrific.

JW: It's more than I could have ever expected.

RM: I will say one thing. I should thank John for my life because that playing earlier and I'm sure everyone benefited. I think I have greatly benefited I don't want to say more than anyone but the experiences that you gave me from like Lori and Zina playing professional tennis. I mean he didn't just go and go with them. He was like, "okay bring her, let her see you know what's it like." So I got to go to the U.S. Open and all the tournaments along with them and experience that coming from a family of 4 kids, middle income, I would have never been able to get an education from Rice University knowing

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the expenses. I was a full scholarship and just seeing the world. Whether you take me out with Zina and Lori or going out to Nationals with me. So...

DM: Go ahead, go ahead.

LT: I just want to say that in the past I guess two months I've I have some kids that I teach at a school and I've taken my kids up to John. As a matter of fact it was like last Friday and you know I told them, I said, "Hey I guess now I've kind of reached my goal because looking back I just want to help people and I guess all I want to be is John and now I haven't had any success but I'm working with the kids just trying to improve their discipline and their thinking skills, all the things that John has taught me I've tried to instill in my kids and I bring them to him so that he can see and he can help. And like I say I just, he still is a mentor to on one to me so I said, "All I want to be is John."

JW: Larry...

LT: What?

JW: Can I tell them how I taught your kids to be gentlemen?

LT: Oh, no...

JW: They wouldn't open the door. They asked me why men open the doors for ladies. That's how you get it! They started laughing. I said, now I asked the parents. They said "I don't believe you told the kids that!" But I said, "They will always open the doors for ladies now!"

LT: Always!

MB: I wanted to say I met John when I was, my mother used to play tennis at MacGregor and I think I met John the first time I met him I might have been 5. I didn't

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play tennis then. I wasn't even thinking about playing tennis then but I remember that time I had this little pink elephant.

JW: Don't use years, age around here.

MB: Sorry. I had this little pink elephant and I didn't know John but I felt comfortable because my mother knew him. He asked me to see the elephant. I gave it to him and he threw it up in the air. He acted like he did and it was really in his hand. But I was looking up in the sky and "Why isn't it coming down!" and I said, "This man is Super man! This man is Super Man he can throw something in the sky and it will not come down." And then he said, "Got it!" and gave it to me and I think that is the analogy for the way that I continued to see John as I was growing up. He was always very even tempered. He expected a lot and set a very high standard for everyone around him without saying a whole lot. He led by example and what was a super model for the kind of person that I knew that I wanted to be. My parents were very strong parents. My father was an awesome, he is an awesome father but John is someone that I've always kept in my heart and in the back of my mind as the kind of person, adult, leader, motivator that I wanted to be, for myself, for the children that I am not responsible for as an administrator an educational administrator and the kind of friend that I wanted to be. So I too I have to thank you for.

JW: Thank you.

MB: ...for everything that you have done for me. I would not be the person I am without you.

JW: The last thing I'm going to say. I was in Boston about three years ago and I was speaking to a group and we gave a clinic and all that. They were asking me questions.

One of the questions that came up, "What's the most important thing to you in the development of a young person?" and it came to me right then. It's one of those airplane things... I said, I was at the airport in Houston. I said I don't like flying. When they said the plane was at that gate I went to the window to check the plane out. It was a big plane it was silver it had two big wings on either side and it had two strong motors under each wing and it had a big tail section back there and it looked like they had about 100 tires, they looked all new. I said, "This plane is going to get me to Boston safely." But then I thought about it. It's not the plane. It's the pilot. I said, "Most people when they work with tennis players they work with their forehand, their back hand their serve but they don't work enough with this, the pilot and this is your copilot and I let them know. Most planes when they have accidents, its pilot error. Most kids when they don't have success on the court, it's the pilot and the co-pilot it's not the stroke, and so that's the most important thing. It has nothing to do with stroke. If you go out there every day everybody's working on forehands, back hands. Nobody's talking to the kids and if you guys know we did a lot of that. That's my approach to tennis, to anything. If you get that mind right the body will follow!"

SM: Well I think that is a great place for us to wrap up. We are going to go ahead and turn off the videotape and then I have a couple of housekeeping items for you guys.

JW: Thank you very much!

SM: Thank you very much!

End of interview