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Tennis Pros

Three local tennis professionals have made a difference on and off court, including Grace Woo, the 72-year-old co-owner of Mendon Racquet and Pool Club

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Center Court

Three veteran Rochester tennis pros talk about what's kept them on top of their game

By Amy Cavalier

Decades of hard work, dedication and discipline have tallied up to success on and off the court for accomplished Rochester tennis professionals Grace Woo, Linda Gohagan and Joan de R. O'Byrne.

Tennis is the lifeblood of Woo, co-owner and operator of Mendon Racquet and Pool Club.

A former high school physics teacher, Woo picked up her first racket at the age of 36 and has been racking up the accolades since. Named to the Kitty Godfree Cup for women players in the age 65 category, the 72-year-old has played numerous United States Tennis Association national and category 2 tournaments and is ranked fourth in the USTA National Women's 70 Singles.

A tennis coach for the past 40 years, Gohagan was named United States Professional Tennis Association Eastern Division College Coach of the Year in 2007.

She has led the St. John's Fisher College women's tennis team to five New York State Women's Collegiate Athletic Association Championship Tournament berths and has piloted the men's team to two appearances in the Empire 8 Championships.

A 10-time district doubles champion, the 63-year-old played competitively up until five years ago.

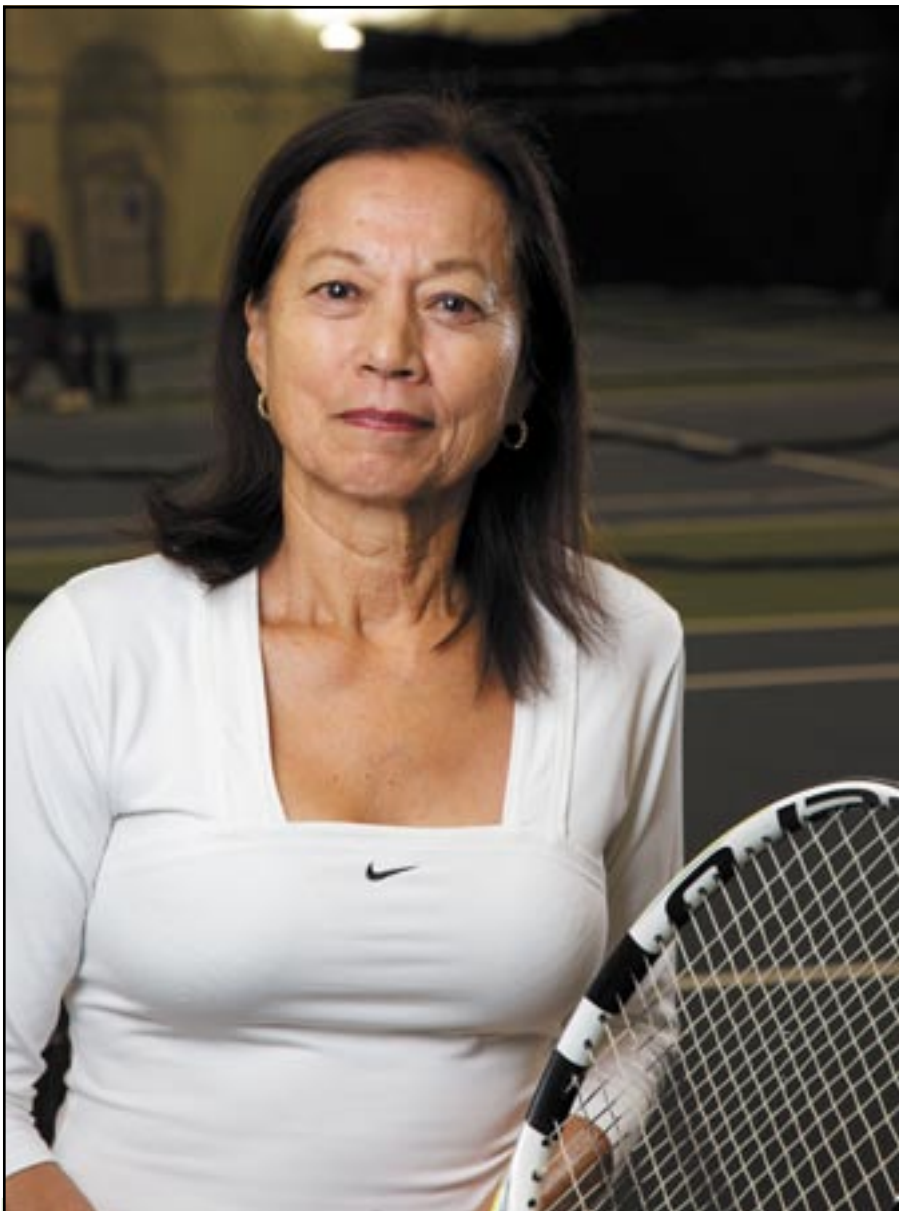
A practicing attorney for 50 years, O'Byrne, 76, is a competitor on the tennis court and in the courtroom. Her career is equally as varied as her athleticism. Since getting back into tennis 30 years ago, she has worked her way up from playing singles as an amateur to a 4.5 rating. O'Byrne won the Western District of New York annual tournament in the 1989 and 1990 and was a member of the USTA team that won the World Team Tennis Nationals in Palm Springs, Calif. in 2005.

They've all found themselves playing against one another at some point or another over the years, but when the final scores are posted, the momentum behind their backhand is a sense of community.

"You get to know these women at tournaments and it's inspiring," says Woo. "We all have coaches. We all work on strength and flexibility training. We all take lessons. You go out and play hard and then afterwards, you go and hang out with these incredible women athletes, so there is this camaraderie."

55+ | cover





Late Bloomer

Grace Woo, 72, of Pittsford, picked up a tennis racket 36 years ago and has been racking up the points ever since.

A USTA professional, she has played in USTA national tournaments, Canadian-US Friendship Cups, Addie Cup, New York state women's intersectional teams and USTA category 2 tournaments.

She ranks fourth in the USTA Women's 70 Singles. Last year, Woo was awarded "bronze balls" for placing third in singles and doubles in the USTA National Women's 70 Indoor Championships in Vancouver, Wash.

Wagstaff, her husband and coach, is a USPTA certified professional. He says Woo worked hard for her success. Beginning at the age of 45, she played in national competitions for five years before claiming her first victory.






"It bugged me, but it never bugged her," he says. "I wouldn't have gone back until I knew I had a chance of winning a round."

With work ethic, motivation and grace, Woo has gone from a 2.5 rating to a 4. A member of the USTA Eastern Women's Team, she has traveled to Turkey and Uruguay as one of the top three female players in the country.

"It's awful tough when you start at her age and you play against girls in college, and on the circuit," says Wagstaff. "Some of the girls have played Wimbledon that she's played with. Some of those girls have been playing since they were 3 years old and in this sport. She didn't even know tennis existed until 36."

Married for 23 years, Woo and Wagstaff own and operate Mendon Racquet and Pool Club in Pittsford. Born and raised in California, she earned a Ph. D. in physical chemistry from the University of California at Riverside.

Scorecard: Grace Woo

-  **Co-owns** Mendon Racquet and Pool Club with husband Jeff Wagstaff
-  **A USTA** professional, she ranks fourth in the USTA National Women's 70 Singles and has a national doubles ranking of 2.
-  **Named** to the Kitty Godfree Cup for women players in the age 65 category in 2006
-  **Has played** in USTA national tournaments, Canadian-US Friendship Cups, Addie Cup, on New York state women's intersectional teams and in USTA category 2 tournaments
-  **Manages** town of Pittsford tennis recreational programs for juniors

"That was my lifelong goal and my life was centered on that," Woo says. "When you work and raise a couple of kids, you're just too busy doing life things, getting dinner on the table."

A mother of two, her love for tennis began when she moved to Rochester in 1977. She was looking for something to take up her time while her daughter was in gymnastics.

"Tennis was a perfect sport," She says. "I could get a great work out in a couple of hours and pick her up."

Woo and Wagstaff met 26 years ago when she began taking lessons with him.

"He really improved my game," she says. "He was a great instructor. That wasn't the reason I married him. We were friends."

In 1995, at age 55, Woo retired as a physics teacher at Brighton High School to assist her husband with his growing junior tennis programs and pursue tennis 100 percent.

"When I retired, I didn't retire," she says. "I retired to sort of start to reinvent myself."

In 2006, Woo was one of four women in the U.S. chosen to travel to Turkey to play in the Kitty Godfree Cup in the 65 age category.

She's won several brass and silver balls in national tournaments, but no gold yet.

She travels the U.S. year-round for tournaments, playing on clay, grass, indoor and hard courts in Alabama, New York City, California, Washington and Florida. Although she and Wagstaff don't play together very often, they do pair up for a national husband-wife tournament in California once a year.

Wagstaff says Woo takes her losses a lot better than anyone he knows.

"She thinks of how to improve," he says. "That's really the right attitude. Most tennis players when they lose are upset for two to three days and then they get over it and realize what they need to do."

Although she is on the court six to seven days a week, Woo takes a holistic approach to training with aerobic and weight training at her gym at home and she also practices



Scorecard: Joan de R. O'Byrne

- **Served** in Peace Corps in East Central Africa
- **Listed** in "The Best Lawyers in America" every year since 1981
- **Named** a "tier 1" family law attorney for 2011 and 2012 by U.S. News & World Report
- **Won** Western District of New York Singles 4.5 Division in 1989 and 1990; finalist in the mixed doubles open division in 2002; winner of World Team Nationals in 2005
- **4.5 tennis** player, yoga enthusiast, downhill skier; still competing in districts in singles and doubles in 2012

yoga.

"You have to be in really good shape to spend hours on the court hitting with people," she says. "It's a really hard job."

The sport can be tough on the body, she admits. So far, she's been lucky to escape without any injuries, knee or shoulder replacements. Being able to maintain her competitive edge for all these years is about balance and discipline, says Woo.

"When you get older, you really have to pace yourself," she says. "I own a club. I could play for hours each day, but I don't. I can't if I want to be involved in this sport until I'm well into my [later years]. You can't just spend hours on the court. You'll hurt yourself."

Tour de Force

One morning in 1982, Joan de R. O'Byrne woke up and decided to get back into tennis.

The long-time lawyer was looking for a way to beat the winter doldrums and socialize, so she dusted off her old Jack Kramer racket and signed up to become a member at Midtown Athletic Club in Rochester. Quickly, she learned things had changed. Instead of wooden rackets, they were now using graphite rackets.

"I had never heard of such a thing," she says.

O'Byrne has worked her way up from playing singles as an amateur to a 4.5 rating. She faced off against Gohagan in a western district semi-finals match and lost, but won in 1989 and 1990.

One of the proudest moments of her life came in 2005, when she played on the team that won the World Team Tennis Nationals in Palm Springs, Calif. After beating out eight other teams to play against Missouri in the finals, it was down to a tie-breaking four-and-a-half-hour match, on one of the hottest days of the year.

"The woman collapsed afterwards and started to cry like a child," she says. "It was one of the proudest but most humbling moments of my life. I felt the woman's pain."

The trophy was presented by tennis legend Billie Jean King.

While she's a very powerful opponent on the court, O'Byrne's success happens as much in the courtroom as it does on the tennis court. At 76 years old, her life is a kaleidoscope of varied experiences, accomplishments, interests and involvements.

In her 50 years of practicing law, she's tried cases in every court in the country—from town court to the U.S. Supreme Court. She's served in the Peace Corps in East Central Africa and helped establish the New York State Physicians Union. When she's not in the courtroom, she's on the tennis court or traveling abroad while deepening her understanding and practice of yoga.

"Practicing law is as competitive as a sport because you're always competing against the skills of the other lawyer but you're competing on more of an intellectual basis," she says. "When you do trials, you might as well be playing on a tennis court. It's challenging. You're not hitting a ball but your marshaling facts, cross-examining, all in an effort to win."

Caught up in the idealism of John F. Kennedy, she earned her undergraduate degree and attended law school at the University of California at Berkeley, one of the most liberal colleges in the country at the time. After graduating in 1961, she worked for the attorney general's office in Sacramento, Calif. Two years later, at the age of 28, she joined the Peace Corps serving in East Central Africa. That's how she met her husband who was in the British Colonial Service.

The couple moved to Rochester in 1968, on the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Her husband took a job as a lawyer. Five years later, he passed away unexpectedly. O'Byrne came close to moving to San Francisco after her husband's death but then she got a phone call that changed

her life—an opportunity to represent a group of physicians looking to establish a union. The New York State Physician's Union was formed as a member of the AFL-CIO under the legal guidance of O'Byrne. In 1974, she went into private practice.

O'Byrne's love of athletics fell to the wayside in her years at college. It wasn't until about 30 years into establishing her career and the loss of her husband when sports crossed her mind again.

"Prior to that there was no time for tennis," she says. "I was building my practice, out every night, all over the region, trying cases until four in the morning. I had a criminal law practice so I was in the town courts every night for arraignments, plea bargains and trials."

In 1984 she says, she realized she wasn't concentrating on herself.

"I had no personal life," she said. "It seemed like all I was doing I was working."

Determined to change that, she picked up tennis again and learned to ski at 48. In 2005, she got hooked on yoga. She traveled to India in 2012 and to Greece in January for a yoga retreat on the island of Lesbos. Yoga has helped her tennis game, O'Byrne says.

"It's good for balance and movement, and I have a lot more muscles than I ever thought I had," she says. "The prana, the breathing part, has helped me because I don't get tight as I used to, when at a crucial place in my match, I can now relax."

O'Byrne says she enjoys the individual nature of tennis.

"That's the way I like it," O'Byrne adds. "I'm not a team player. I live alone. I practice alone. I like individual sports. I'm an individualist by nature, so it just goes with the territory."

Fellow tennis player Renee Derosiers has known O'Byrne for many decades and competed against her on the court.

"She's extremely competitive and dominant in this sport," Derosiers says.

Describing her friend as "a fascinating person with a heart of gold," Derosiers says O'Byrne has the



Scorecard: Linda Gohagan

- **2007** USPTA Eastern Division College Coach of the Year
- **2002** Eastern Volunteer of the Year Award; Empire 8 coach of the year
- **Women's 35** District Doubles Finalist 1991, 1999; Women's 35 District Open Doubles Finalist in 1997
- **Women's 35** District Doubles Champion 1992-1997
- **Women's 45** District Doubles Champion 1999-2002, 2004
- **Six-time** 45 Women's Singles District Finalist

intelligence, mental toughness, focus and strategy required to be a fierce competitor.

"She's definitely out there holding her own and she's beating younger competition," she says. "And they totally underestimate her. She's a slight woman, but she's got a great technique and she knows how to play the game."

As she gets ready to turn 77, with no sight of slowing down on the horizon, O'Byrne says her yoga practice and recent study of philosophy has also helped her come to terms with the concept of aging.

"Defining myself or identifying myself as a lawyer and nothing else is incorrect because it's only a role I play in life, just like the role of a tennis player or a yogi or a skier or a mother, sister or friend," she says. "These are things I do. They aren't me, so when life ends, the essence remains."

In the meantime, not much has changed about her life.

"It's difficult for me to accept my age because everything I was doing at 40 I'm still doing," she says. "I'm still playing tennis, still skiing, still practicing law, still socializing, still going out on dates, and doing yoga. Namaste."

For the Love of Tennis

Growing up on a horse farm in South Jersey with thoroughbred racehorses, Linda Gohagan has always loved sports.

In college, she played basketball, softball and was an all-conference field hockey player. She gave up softball to join the tennis team her junior year at Glassboro State Teachers College, now known as Rowan University, where she earned her bachelor's degree in health and physical education in 1973.

"I liked to run and tennis to me was a challenge so I went into tennis over softball," she says. "I was very competitive and it was a sport you

could play for the rest of your life.”

Gohagan met her husband on the tennis courts at the Haddonwood Indoor Tennis Club in New Jersey while taking lessons. Once she became a certified USPTA professional, she landed a full time job as a club pro at Cherry Hill Indoor Tennis Club in New Jersey.

In 1975, Gohagan moved to Rochester and began coaching at Irondequoit Tennis Center. She decided to remain in Rochester after she and her husband divorced. Since then, she’s taught more than over a thousand people at more than a handful of facilities including Salmon Creek Golf Course, Midtown Athletic Club, where she taught full time for 11 years, Manhattan Square Tennis Club, Webster Tennis Club, the University Club and Brighton Tennis Club. She also works at Bell Racket Spots, a pro shop in East Rochester, stringing rackets and assisting customers.

Throughout the years, Gohagan has seen her fair share of success on the court, playing in tournaments in the Middle States section of the USTA, eventually ranking 13th in the Eastern Division.

“It made me a better player because I had to learn to control the ball,” she says in regards to how her competitive career helps her in her coaching career. “It technically made you think about your strokes a little bit more. It helps you to understand that you win by being consistent, not hitting the ball real hard.”

In 1978, Gohagan strapped on her running shoes and competed in her first Rochester Marathon. There were only three other women in the race. The other two women did not finish.

“That’s my claim to fame,” she says. “That’s the only marathon I ever won.”

Gohagan ran over 12 marathons and many 10K road races before focusing more on competitive tennis. She became a Women’s 35 District Doubles Champion five years running and a five-time Women’s 45 District Champion. She continues playing tennis but not competitive

tournaments.

“It got frustrating and I had to accept the fact that that’s part of the process,” she says. “I can still play a good game and my brain knows what to do with the ball, but I may not be able to get to the ball as fast as I used to.”

Gohagan’s college coaching career began at the University of Rochester, where she served as head women’s tennis coach

from 1984-1986. She also coached at the SUNY Brockport.

A USTA member for 42 years and a USPTA Level 1 pro for 35 years, Gohagan has been giving tennis lessons at Monroe Golf Club since 1997. Her season at Monroe Golf Club runs May through early September. From August through May, she coaches the St. John Fisher College men’s and women’s tennis teams.

“It’s not easy sometimes,” she says. “It’d be nice to have one job, but at the same time I like the variety. I wouldn’t be able to do a 9-to-5 job.”

In 2002, Gohagan won the USTA Eastern Volunteer of the Year Award and in 2007, she was named USPTA Eastern Division College Coach of the Year. She also won Empire 8 Coach of the Year in 2003.

Now entering her 16th season as the head coach for the Fisher women’s tennis team, Gohagan has led the ladies to five New York State Women’s Collegiate Athletic Association Championship Tournaments as well as two Empire 8 Championships. Coach of the men’s team for 15 years, she’s carried them to two Empire 8 championship appearances the last four seasons.

At the Division 3 level, Gohagan

says, academics comes first for athletes, but she says, “I still want the players to win.”

“My approach to coaching is for the players to focus on performance as individuals and as a team,” says Gohagan. “If they focus on improving with each match and having fun, they will have a better chance of achieving their goals.”

Patricia Danaher of Fairport took lessons from Gohagan and served as her assistant coach at SJFC from 1999-2004. Gohagan is a good competitor and a great coach “who the kids respect a lot,” says Danaher.

“She’s tough on them and they accept it,” says Danaher. “They’re good at putting forth as much effort as they can.”

When she’s not coaching, the Irondequoit resident serves as league coordinator of the Ladies Inner Club Summer Tennis League, a competitive league that plays June through August. Professionally, Gohagan stays current by reading, watching videos and attending tennis seminars.

Gohagan admits it’s been challenging succeeding in a male-dominated career, both in pay scale and the opportunities presented. However, the pay-off is well worth it.

“When I get up in the morning, I don’t dread going into work because I love what I do,” she says. “It’s an amazing opportunity to be able to teach and coach tennis for a living because it is a sport for a lifetime.”

