



NET

GAIN

BOTH MEN'S AND WOMEN'S
TENNIS ARE ON THE FAST
TRACK TO SUCCESS. WHAT'S IN
THE WATER FOUNTAINS IN THE
BOSS TENNIS CENTER?

BY BRUCE WOOD



Dartmouth's Alexis Boss Tennis Center was recognized in 2002 as the Tennis Industry Magazine court of the year, and a couple of years later it was one of just four collegiate centers in the nation honored with a United States Tennis Association Facility Award.

The Alexis Boss Tennis Center & Alan Gordon Pavilion remains one of the crown jewels of the Dartmouth athletic complex and now, more than a decade after receiving accolades for its design and implementation, the building's prime residents are earning important recognition of their own.

In early February the Dartmouth women's tennis team posted a stunning shutout of top-seeded Princeton and beat defending champion Columbia by the same score on the way to the 2015 ECAC Championship. The men's team, meanwhile, also made it to the ECAC Championship finals before losing at No. 30 Harvard.

The Dartmouth women got off to a 10-0 start this winter, winning the last five matches of the run by a combined 26-1 count. The men's team opened the winter with a couple of lopsided victories before knocking off No. 66 Denver and dropping a 4-3 decision to No. 64 Indiana. Their run in the ECACs included victories over ranked St. John's and Brown teams.

Add it up and women's coach Bob Dallis, now in his 13th year at the helm, believes that 15 years after coming on line the Boss Tennis Center has a couple of tenants it can be justifiably proud of.

"When I started here the analogy I would use was we had this lovely mansion, the Alexis Boss Center and Alan Gordon Pavilion, with no furniture," said Dallis. "We were an empty vessel, but now that's changed."

Not that there weren't high points even in difficult times.

In 2011 the Big Green women won their first and only Ivy League championship, finishing tied atop the standings with Yale at 6-1.

And in 2012 the men's team coached by Chris Drake had a shot at Dartmouth's first conference championship in 16 years before dropping a 4-3 decision to Harvard. The men were strong again last year, posting a 5-2 mark in the Ivies.

But for the most part it has been short periods of success punctuating long stretches of frustration or strong performances by overmatched squads that tried hard but couldn't regularly compete against Ivy League powers.



SAM TODD

MEN'S TENNIS

One of the main reasons the future of Dartmouth tennis is bright is Chris Drake. What he does and how much he commits himself to our development as tennis players, citizens, and leaders is unmatched by any coach I've seen or heard of. His numbers speak for themselves and what he has done for this program, and I am honored to have played for him these past four years.

We work really hard on our games and on our conditioning, and so to me it's not entirely surprising we've had some success the past few years. Coach Drake has come in and changed the culture of Dartmouth tennis, and with it, the results of Dartmouth tennis, and there is no reason to believe the program will not continue to grow.

We are still not where we want to be, so I am excited to see the future even after I graduate.

We are so lucky to have the facilities we do: Boss Tennis Center is one of the best indoor college tennis facilities I have seen and Floren and Leverone are other great resources we have access too that help us perform at a high level. We also are so fortunate to play in front of such great fans, nicknamed "The Dog Pound" last year, who support us continually and make it fun to compete as a Dartmouth tennis player.

It's been great over my four years to see the growth of our schedule and now having the ability to play such great teams like Michigan, Michigan State, Florida State, TCU, etc. this year. I cannot wait for those opportunities and certainly having such a tough, but fun, schedule is a good way to test ourselves and improve.

The other thing I love about this program is the feeling that you represent something more than yourself everyday: that you are always representing and competing for Dartmouth and Dartmouth tennis. The connection to alumni, both recent and in the distant past, as well the connection to teammates current are some of the off-court things I love about this team and that help us succeed.

Sam Todd's recruiting visit to Dartmouth was made possible by the generosity of Tench Coxe '80 and Steve Mandel '78 through the Athletic Sponsor Program.

Between 2000 and 2009 the men's team won just six Ivy League matches while losing 64. Except for the championship '11 season the best the Dartmouth women could do between 2000 and 2013 were a couple of fourth-place finishes in Ivy League play.

Both Dallis and Drake are confident the hard times are finally behind the Big Green programs in large part because systems are in place to enable them to bring better players to Hanover and then to develop them into even stronger players once they are on campus.

It was the sense that a turnaround was in store that helped convince Drake – a two-time All-Ivy League pick and captain at Brown – to accept an offer to take over for the retiring Chuck Kinyon as Dartmouth head coach in 2011.

"This was a program that had been struggling but things started to turn the year before I got here," he said. "During the portion of my interview with the players you could see they were clearly excited. They had won a couple of Ivy League matches and were close to winning a third.

"The players were excited and everybody I talked to around the (athletic) department had a really good feeling about athletics in general. They felt like things were going in the right direction, and that's a big reason why I took the job – because I felt we would be supported and have a chance to be successful."

Dallis was feeling the same way at the same time. Then-President Jim Yong Kim had come in and made it clear he would push for athletic success, and the subsequent arrival of Athletic Director Harry Sheehy from Williams College – the Stanford of Division III – only reinforced the notion that better times were ahead.

Recruiting is the lifeblood of virtually every college athletic program and with Kim and Sheehy in place there was a noticeable uptick in the quality of recruit being walked through the Boss Center after too many lean years and that continued with the arrive of President Philip Hanlon.

To be sure, the Big Green had won the Ivy League women's title in the spring of Sheehy's first year, but for as hard as Dallis had worked on the recruiting trail, serendipity helped deliver the anchor of the championship team to Dartmouth. Molly Scott, a four-year All-Ivy League pick, happened to be the daughter of two Dartmouth graduates.

"Despite telling her parents she wasn't going to school where they went, she took an official visit and loved it," said Dallis with a grin. "We got lucky."

The Ivy League championship notwithstanding, the depth on the women's roster had been diminishing, at least in part as a result of the economic crash of 2008 and consequent belt tightening according to Dallis.

The men's team, meanwhile, was facing its own challenges. While the Big Green posted 4-3 Ivy League records in Drake's first two seasons, nothing came easy.

"We were closing the gap but we were behind in terms of talent on paper," he said. "By my second year when we played a match for a share of the Ivy League title we had one five-star recruit along with guys who were three- or four-stars according to a recruiting website. Harvard was all five-star, blue-chip recruits, and we pushed them to the point of defeat.

"We were closing the gap through work ethic, competitiveness on the court and the closeness of guys who were really, really hard workers playing for each other."

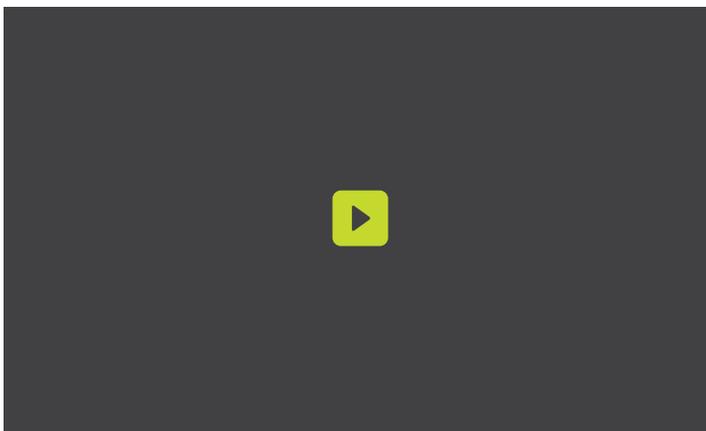
Under Sheehy's leadership recruiting roadblocks were lowered and the coaches began to bring up the talent level in Boss.

"Our relationship with admissions changed greatly," said Dallis. "No longer were we taking the players we could get and trying to make them as good a player as possible. We now were starting to select the class."

Aiding that cause was the addition of a development officer who strengthened the relationship with tennis alumni and brainstormed ways to bring in money, including fundraising dinners in New York City. With annual giving to tennis tripled, there have been dividends far beyond being able to buy players shoes, to pay for their racquet stringing, and to design and erect displays illustrating the history of the programs.

"Having added resources has been important," said Dallis. "Being able to make home visits or watch a kid practice has made a big difference. In our sport you basically bring in three kids a year and if you can average one-and-a-half kids that are super high level players a year that changes what your team is."

Exhibit A would be current No. 1 Taylor Ng, who some Ivy



League coaches might have missed because she didn't follow the normal route and play on the national scene from an early age. Rather than focus simply on tennis, she played a variety of sports, and in fact was a very talented lacrosse player in New Jersey.

Where it may have been cost-prohibitive in the past, Dallis was able to go to the outskirts of Philadelphia and watch her play three days in a row. "That's when I realized she was very good," he said. "I could also see how she carried herself on the court, which was important."

Talented players like men's No. 1 Dovydas Sakinis can have coattails that attract other talented players which raises the competition in practice and in turn makes everyone better.

Hanover was becoming more prominent on the college tennis map for accomplished high school players.

"Recruiting is diligence in getting the word out," Drake said. "Getting people to see our facility was a big key. When you walk through the doors and look over the courts it sends a message that tennis is the real deal here."

"I remember when I was looking at schools in the Ivy League facilities hadn't become the difference maker that they are now. I went to Brown which had four courts on top of their athletic department building. Brown didn't have an amazing facility but nobody else really did. Since then so many people have upgraded."



TAYLOR NG

WOMEN'S TENNIS

The future of the tennis program at Dartmouth should be bright for a variety of reasons. To start, within our team, we are very driven in all that we do – tennis, academics, extracurriculars, community service, etc. We all desire to be the best we can be – to set goals and achieve them. Speaking for the women's tennis program, it is incredibly unique primarily, in my opinion, because of the culture that Coach Dallis cultivates day in and day out. Team chemistry is central to our success and something we focus on a lot. We all get along really well and push each other to do better within and outside of practice. Coach Dallis emphasizes that we all represent something greater than ourselves when we play. We represent each other, we represent our team, and we represent our school.

I believe we all take a lot of pride in competing for Dartmouth, so when we step out on the court, we want to give our all each and every day. Additionally, another aspect that makes the Dartmouth tennis program unique is our focus on the mental side of competition. So often, teams focus on the physical end – training hard, drilling, and playing for hours upon hours.

While we do focus a lot on the physical game itself, I believe our mental training differentiates us from other teams and other programs. At the college level, everyone has talent and skill. What differentiates top players and top programs is the ability to perform and to thrive in tight situations, to maintain composure and play confidently when matches are close.

For the past two years, the Dartmouth men's and women's tennis teams have been working with Positive Performance mental training to improve our goal setting, our focus, and our relaxation, among other things. I believe that this year, we are really seeing some results from the mental training. We are more focused, we are setting goals and achieving them, and we are playing more confidently than ever before. I honestly cannot say enough positive things about the Dartmouth tennis program. I would reiterate something that Coach Dallis said, however, which is that this is just the beginning.

We have had some great achievements, but there is a lot more to accomplish. Our goals moving forward include strong performances over spring break and, ultimately, an Ivy League Title. We are all very excited with where the program is at now, and we are looking forward to where it is headed in the future.

Taylor Ng's recruiting visit to Dartmouth was made possible by the generosity of Darryl and Suzanne Tannenbaum DP and Albert G. Tierney III '75 through the Athletic Sponsor Program.



Harvard, Yale, Penn. The facilities are big deal now and I think ours is the best of them all.”

Beyond concrete and mortar, sheet metal and glass and the addition of a large, new electronic scoreboard, the Dartmouth coaches had another weapon in Sheehy, the athletic director.

“Harry has been an unbelievable resource for the tennis program,” said Dallis. “Two of our real key recruits, Jacqueline Crawford and Kristina Mathis, probably were sold by Harry’s commitment to the tennis program. Being able to sit in his office with their families and listen to what he has to say about Dartmouth, Dartmouth athletics and the role of DP2 was really, really valuable.

“Having an athletic director who says, ‘Any time I am in town and you want to bring a recruit around I am happy to meet with them,’ is gigantic.”

Identifying good players and recruiting them to Dartmouth were two legs of the tennis stool. The third has been developing them as athletes and tennis players.

“I can I can tell recruits we have everything we need here to help them develop their games,” said Drake. “We have great facilities. We’ve got great academics. We have access to courts with coaches that are willing to work with you and help you improve.

“The things DP2 has put in place have directly helped us whether it is strength and conditioning programs, massage, what Katelyn Stravinsky does with academics, or what Steven Spalding does in developing leadership. When you bring recruits around they can see the commitment and understand this is a place where you can be a serious athlete and student.”

In conjunction with DP2 Dallis points to visits by Lindsay Wilson of Positive Performance Mental Training for helping the Big Green turn the corner.

“She’s come in January the last two years and that has had a big influence on what we talk about, how we go about competing and raising our level of focus,” he said.

Improved schedules made possible in part by the Friends group are attractive to recruits while giving players an opportunity to challenge themselves and the coaches the chance to size up their

players and teams.

The men’s schedule features a long list of big-name opponents like Minnesota, Michigan, Florida State and Tulane. The women are tested this year by Mississippi State, Long Beach State, Houston and UC Irvine among others.

“When you are playing teams that are really good, if you have anything that is going to be exposed, it will be exposed,” said Drake. “You learn what it takes to play at the level you want to play at.”

The relationship between the men’s and women’s programs has benefited both teams as well.

“Our programs have always gotten along well,” said Dallis. “We share everything from fundraising to equipment to the (stationary) bikes. There’s never a conflict about court time. Chris has been very generous if I say, ‘We’ve got a big match coming up and I need this girl to see a bigger ball. Can I borrow one of your guys for a half-hour?’ And he’s done that. Or it’s, ‘Hey Bob, one of my guys just wants to hit some balls, can he stay and hit with one of your girls?’

“There’s a nice relationship. Chris and I talk about tennis a good deal. When the men are seen as being successful I think that spurs the women on, and when the women’s team is successful I think that spurs the guys on. The sports are little bit different so what you may want to do training-wise might be a little bit different and how you go about building a great team might be a little bit different. But what they want to accomplish is the same.

“They want to be great students. They want to be involved in their community. They want to compete, and they want to represent Dartmouth well.”

Which is exactly what they are doing.

Just like the Alexis Boss Center and Alan Gordon Pavilion. **DP**

Women’s Tennis received and at-large NCAA Tournament Bid. The men were the first team left out. Both finished second in the Ivy League