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The man who changed the face of tennis in Zimbabwe

Barbara Nussbaum

Hundreds of Zimbabweans love tennis today – and have made something of their lives -- because of the passion of a man called Larry Katz.

Katz, who died on 23 June 2020 at the age of 63 after a nine-year battle with cancer, dedicated his life to using tennis to uplift young people in Bulawayo.

Katz started coaching tennis in the Bulawayo district in the mid-1980s, starting at the Parkview Sports Club. He then formed the National Tennis Development (NTD) programme, which was to make a significant difference in the lives of hundreds of young Zimbabweans living in Bulawayo's townships. In fact, it ignited a grassroots movement that took tennis to all disadvantaged areas of Bulawayo.

Katz was born on February 4, 1957, and went to Carmel Nursery school and Primary School, both Jewish day schools in Bulawayo. He became head boy of Carmel Primary School before going on to complete high school at Milton.

He showed great promise in tennis from an early age, and played in junior tournaments in Zimbabwe and South Africa. At 18, he won a tennis scholarship to the United States.

He started out at Arizona State University, and then went on to Honolulu, Hawaii, where he obtained his business degree while playing for the university tennis team. After graduating, Katz joined the ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) tennis tour, initially competing in tournaments in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal.

Following his tour of Europe, Katz played in an ATP Tour circuit in India, where he won his first ATP ranking point. It was in India that Katz first saw successful tennis development programmes, which influenced him to start something similar in Zimbabwe.

On his return to Bulawayo in late 1984, Katz joined his father in the family business, and taught and coached tennis in the townships of Bulawayo in his spare time. The following year, he formed the NTD programme.



The Bulawayo council had built tennis courts in a number of townships, but it was still the preserve of the privileged. As Clement Whata, an NTD alumnus now living in Bulawayo explained, the price of a tennis racquet was prohibitive for a 14-year-old teenager living in a township.

Dr Nceku Nyathi, an NTD participant and now a senior lecturer in organisation studies at Royal Holloway University in London, said that it was no easy task to transform a sport that was the preserve of privileged whites. However, “Where other people saw obstacles and barriers, Larry found a way.” Katz sourced racquets, balls, stringing machines, shoes, and clothing. He approached the Arthur Ashe Foundation and various American donors who sent equipment to Zimbabwe via the diplomatic pouch.

Katz’s most talented pupils developed their coaching skills to teach others, a simple technique that expanded NTD exponentially. About three decades later, the NTD legacy is still going strong.

Through Katz’s network, he was also able to open doors for youngsters who wouldn’t have dreamed that they could to study and play tennis in the US on full scholarships. Patrick Mlauzi was a protégé of Katz’s who won a tennis scholarship to the US. Mlauzi completed two master’s degrees, and remained in the US.

Today Mlauzi and his family live in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he is a vice-president at Wells Fargo. Mlauzi was the first NTD member to win a scholarship to the US. Many more NTD youngsters joined Mlauzi in the US over the years, some coaching in prestigious clubs and landing jobs across the globe, from the United Kingdom to New Zealand.

Kabelo Masiane, who was very close to Katz, coaches at a prestigious Jewish tennis club in Boca Raton, Florida. "There is an infinite number of lives that Larry touched," he said. "It's difficult to quantify how many people have actually benefitted from Larry," he said.

Nerva Ndlovu went on to become a global marketing executive for Coca-Cola, and is based in South Africa. Ndlovu wanted to do a marketing diploma at IMM Graduate School, but in the early '80s, couldn't afford the books. Katz assisted him with the cost of his studies, and enrolled someone to teach him marketing on Saturday mornings in town. Afterwards, Ndlovu would walk to Makokoba township where he would meet Katz for extra lessons in accounting.

"I can't thank Larry enough for the foundation he gave me as a youngster. Accounting was tough for me. Larry would go to four different centres in townships of Bulawayo to coach people on Saturday mornings, and he still found the time and energy to spend two hours on Saturday afternoons tutoring me in accounts."

Another NTD graduate, Million Phiri, was involved with NTD from the age of 14, and eventually moved to Johannesburg. He happened to go to Glenhazel Tennis Club soon after he arrived. "I thrashed one of the players, who was so surprised that he landed up offering me a job in his company. From there, he spring boarded into his own business."

Said Whata, "I could write a book about how tennis opened up avenues for myself and other kids. Tennis teaches you how to make decisions for yourself, how to be independent, and how to manage time. Tennis prepares your mind."

"Tennis helped me with focus and discipline, and was an important factor in my becoming head boy at Milton High and later in landing a job at Coopers & Lybrand," said Ndaba Moyo. Ndaba Moyo, now an ed tech entrepreneur in Johannesburg, said, "Larry was selfless and imparted so much to our lives. He leaves behind a precious legacy - by picking up on the needs at the grassroots, and then working things through at every level, taking the time to care about each individual."

"Katz changed the course of tennis in Matabeleland without cellphones or smart phones," said Moyo. "In fact, NTD was the first grassroots sports movement in Zimbabwe. In hindsight, Larry achieved his dream, as is evidenced in the stories of so many alumni of NTD."

Milton High School became a place that attracted a number NTD players and if one scans the photographs on the Old Miltonians website, <http://www.oldmiltonians.com/sports/tennis.html>

One can see pictures of Kabelo Masiane, Patrick Mlauzi, Ndaba Moyo, Million Phiri, Clement Whata, along with Mrs. Sue Allard, who became a dedicated coach for Milton's tennis teams.

He leaves behind his wife, Shana, and three sons, Daniel, Jonny and Davey, his mother Pam Katz and sister Desiree.

