Fitzgerald Made His Mark on the ABAC Tennis Program

TIFTON—There’s no question that two-time International Tennis Association Player of the Year Paul Fitzgerald left his mark on the tennis program at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. He also left fragments from his two front teeth on a certain light pole in Fort Myers, Fla.
The gregarious Irishman from Cork will never forget that Friday, the 13th day of October in 2006. Neither will his coach, Alan Kramer.

“While playing doubles late that Friday afternoon, Paul chased an overhead and ran face first into a light pole off the court,” Kramer remembered. “He was out for a minute, and you couldn’t hear a sound across that whole tennis complex. The ambulance came, and we got him to the hospital.

“All the time we were there in the hospital he was begging the nurse to release him so he could play for the ITA singles’ championship on Saturday. Her boyfriend was a hockey player so she told Paul she would see what she could do. The doctor did release him but told Paul he wouldn’t feel like playing. Boy was he wrong.”

Without even warming up, Fitzgerald played in the 8 a.m. match the next morning and upset the top seed in a three-hour and seven minute match to win the title.

“I have never seen anything like it,” Kramer said. “He had a bloody towel that he used after every point. He said his dad was a boxer in Ireland so he was used to the blood. I guess it was as close to a UFC cage match as you could get in tennis.”

“At first I didn’t think there would be any way that I could play,” Fitzgerald told a newspaper reporter later that day. “I started to feel better a couple of hours after getting to the hospital. When he said I was okay to play, I thought I might as well give it a shot.”

For his heroics on the ABAC tennis court, Fitzgerald has been named as a member of the 2016 class of the ABAC Athletics Hall of Fame. He will be inducted on April 1 in the ABAC Alumni Association Homecoming Awards Dinner in Gressette Gym. Tickets to the 6 p.m.
ceremony are $30 per person. The event also includes top award winners from the ABAC Alumni Association as a part of the 2016 Homecoming Week activities.

Fitzgerald was the Most Valuable Player of the National Junior College Athletic Association Region XVII tournament in 2007 and 2008 when he led the Stallions to back to back state championships. He finished third in singles in the national tournament in 2008 when ABAC wound up third in the nation.

Selected as an ITA All-American in both 2007 and 2008, Fitzgerald helped ABAC defeat highly touted Emory University 5-4 during his days as a Stallion. He then received a scholarship to play tennis for Armstrong State University, one of the top tennis programs in NCAA Division II. Fitzgerald was a key ingredient when Armstrong won the national championship in 2009.

“Paul inspired others that day in Fort Myers,” Kramer said. “From then on, he was a legend as the word traveled fast about the unbelievable situation. You would not believe how many followers he had at random tennis matches the next couple of years.”

Other Hall of Fame inductees include Jackie Moore, Ty Wright, Wayne Cooper, Tom Moody, David Owens, and the 1984 state championship women’s basketball team.

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