

## Paul Gerken



From the courts at Shore and Country to the grass at Wimbledon, Paul Gerken reached heights that no other tennis player from Norwalk has ever attained.

The 62-year-old Gerken was born in New York City, but a year after his birth moved with his family to East Norwalk, not far from the Shore and Country Club where he first picked up a tennis racquet.

By the time he was 14, Gerken was the top-ranked junior in New England for the 16-year-old age division. In fact, as a junior, he held top-five New England rankings in every age group, including top rankings in 14- and 18-and-under doubles. And in 1967, he held the distinction of being ranked No. 1 and No. 2 in singles at the same time in the 16 and 18 divisions, respectively.

A 1968 graduate of Norwalk High School, Gerken captured the state championship in singles in both his junior and senior years. It was also in 1968 that he reached a career-high national ranking of No. 7 in the 18s while advancing to the finals of both the National Junior Indoor Championships and the prestigious Orange Bowl, where he was runner-up to Dick Stockton, a future World No. 8 and Wimbledon semifinalist.

Gerken was also the only tennis player from New England to be selected to the U.S. Junior Davis Cup team in 1967-68. His success on the high school and junior level earned Gerken a tennis scholarship to Stanford University, where, as the No. 1 player on the freshmen team, he was unbeaten while earning All-America honors as a varsity player.

After one year, he transferred to Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, where he played beside Stockton and Brian Gottfried, who a few years later reached the French Open finals and was ranked as high as No. 3 in the world. Gerken played three years at Trinity, winning 70 of his 74 matches and was named All-America two more times. As a senior in 1972, he reached the NCAA doubles finals while helping Trinity win the NCAA championship in men's tennis.

During his collegiate career, Gerken was also named to the U.S. Junior Davis Cup Under-21 team and he played in the main singles draw at the U.S. Open all four years as an amateur. Following his graduation, Gerken joined the pro tour in 1972 and became one of the fastest rising young players in the game.

At the 1973 French Open, he reached the round of 16, his best showing in a Grand Slam tournament. In the third round, he beat Guillermo Vilas before losing his fourth-round match to Roger Taylor in five sets.

Gerken appeared three times in both the French Open and Wimbledon Championships, while competing at the U.S. Open every year from 1968 to 1975, reaching the third round four times.

His best year on tour was 1973 when he reached a career-high ranking of No. 32 in the world. Besides his effort at Roland Garros, Gerken reached two singles finals in Calgary and Salt Lake City, two doubles finals in Hong Kong and Baltimore, and was selected to the 1973 U.S. Davis Cup Team.

He also posted perhaps the biggest victory of his career in 1973 when he defeated World No. 1 John Newcombe in five sets at the West German Open. Also in '73, Gerken beat Ilie Nastase and the great Bjorn Borg.

In fact, Gerken was one of the few players who had a winning record against Borg, beating him in straight sets again in 1974 while his lone loss came in a third-set tiebreaker. To put that in perspective, John McEnroe's career record against Borg was 7-7.

Gerken owned victories against other future Hall of Famers, including two over Arthur Ashe. The first time he beat him, Gerken was just 18 years-old and only two months out of Norwalk High School. That victory came in 1968, while he would beat Ashe again in 1974 at a WCT tournament in Tokyo.

It was during the 1974 U.S. Open that Gerken was first bothered by a painful right shoulder, which would later be diagnosed as a double tear of the rotator cuff. He underwent surgery for it in December of 1975 and was sidelined all of 1976 while he recovered. He tried to make a comeback in 1977, but decided to retire the following year at the age of 27.

Gerken has remained close to the game he loved, however. He served as the head tennis coach for the men's team at Columbia University in New York from 1979-82, and in 1982 became the Director of Tennis at the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills, Queens, the site where he played in nine U.S. Open tournaments.

Gerken has also been a teaching pro at the Shippan Racquet Club in Stamford, at the Fairfield Beach Club and Fairfield Indoor Tennis Center, and Maid Stone in East Hampton, L.I. He is currently the Director of Tennis at the Round Hill Club in Greenwich.

There is also a tennis award named in his honor at the Shore and Country Club which is presented to a junior player, male or female, who attains a top-five ranking in New England.

A father of four and grandfather of two, Gerken now resides in New Fairfield with his wife Suzanne.