

This is installment #2 in a projected series of Profiles on individuals who have been guests at the Norfolk Country Club:

Bill Talbert

1918-1999

**Hall of Fame Tennis Champion
Davis Cup Captain**

Triumphed Over Lifelong Type 1 Diabetes



George Loh lithograph

*"Banting and Best discovered insulin and made it possible for diabetics to live.
Bill Talbert showed them how to live."*

- Anonymous Doctor

Growing up in a working class family in Ohio, Billy Talbert had a passion for sports, in particular for his hometown Cincinnati Reds. Thin as a reed and gifted with a lithe quickness, Talbert played baseball every chance he had, dreaming of one day playing for the Reds. In 1928 when he was 10 years old, Talbert began feeling lethargic and constantly thirsty.

Shortly thereafter, his life and baseball aspirations were abruptly derailed when he was diagnosed with type 1 juvenile diabetes. Immediately, he was put on a strict sugarless diet and cautioned that any kind of exertion could have dire, life-threatening consequences. Ignominiously, he was sentenced to giving himself insulin shots every day for the rest of his life.

In 1906, French post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, a diabetic, was painting outdoors in Aix-en-Provence on a cold October day when he was caught in a heavy rainstorm. Walking home, he collapsed in the road, went into hypoglycemic shock and lapsed into a fatal diabetic coma.

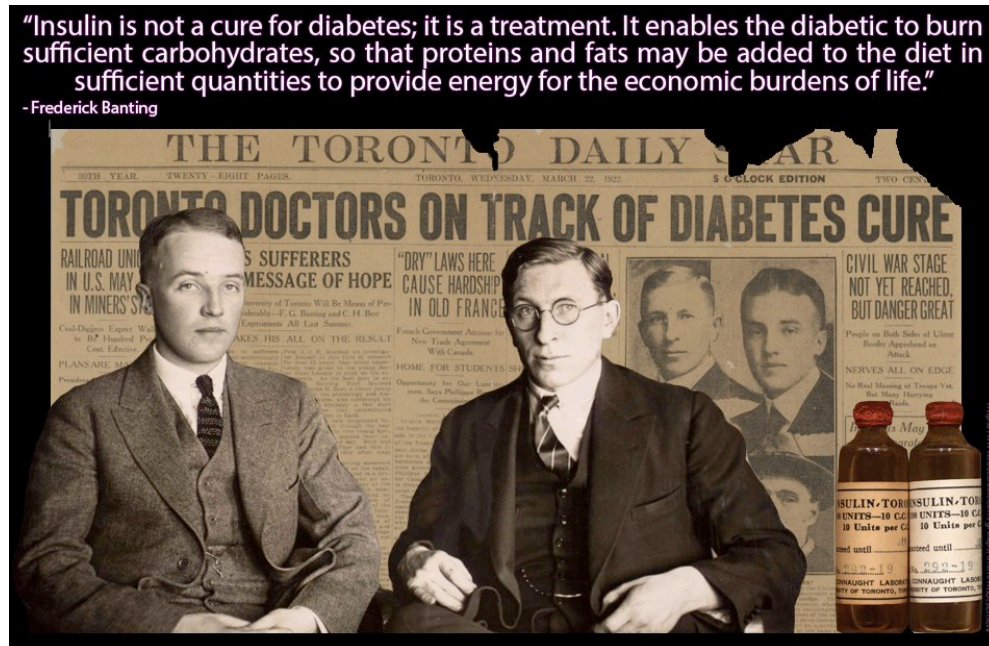


Self-Portrait With Bowler Hat - Paul Cézanne - 1885

Type 1 diabetes is a chronic, autoimmune disorder in which the body's immune system destroys beta cells in the pancreas that produce insulin, a hormone that regulates delivery of energy-producing blood sugar (glucose) to the cellular system. Without insulin, sugar stays in the bloodstream and attacks the body's major organs. Well over a million Americans are afflicted with type 1 diabetes and endure an ongoing, delicate balancing act of rigorously calculating

blood sugar levels and closely monitoring excessive activity, stress levels and food intake - a lifelong physical and emotional ordeal.

In 1922 (only six years before Talbert's diagnosis) two Canadian doctors, Frederick Banting and Charles Best, developed an insulin derived from cow and pig pancreases that could be injected into diabetics to regulate their glucose delivery systems. Before this monumental discovery, having type 1 diabetes, which is neither preventable or curable, often resulted in an early death; but daily insulin injections enable diabetics to live relatively normal lives.



Charles Best and Frederick Banting

Young Billy Talbert was understandably distraught when he was diagnosed with diabetes. Forbidden by his doctors to do anything strenuous - not even run - for fear of a dangerous diabetic episode, he was relegated to watching his friends play baseball in the sandlots across the street from his home. Seeing how disconsolate his hyper-active, athletic son had become, Talbert's father secretly went to his doctor and asked if perhaps Billy might try a non-contact sport like tennis. Reluctantly, the doctor gave Billy the okay as long as he rigorously monitored his diet, vigilantly watched for threatening symptoms and gave himself an insulin shot every day.

From the get-go, Talbert found enormous satisfaction in hitting a tennis ball. He wasn't a natural tennis player, but he practiced hard and played with fierce determination. Scrupulously, he always carried a lump of sugar with him in case the intensity with which he played tennis compromised his fragile immune system. He became known as a scrappy, relentless competitor and soon was playing in - and winning - several Cincinnati municipal tournaments. Still in high school, he won the Ohio state singles championship in 1936.



Teen-Ager Billy Talbert Smacks Home a Winner

"You can't make big money in tennis, but you can live well without money"

- Bill Talbert

Before the Open Era began in 1968, tennis was an amateur sport patronized and financially supported by well-off tennis enthusiasts for whom tennis tournaments were heady, sophisticated social events. Prestigious tennis clubs staged annual tournaments on a tour called **The Circuit** to which the world's best tennis players, regardless of their background, were invited to compete. Players expenses were taken care of and they were cosseted at posh hotels or at the grand homes of wealthy sportsmen; and they were always warmly welcomed at opulent tournament fêtes where they mingled with star-struck tennis devotees. Talbert became a fixture on The Circuit and found himself frequenting Manhattan's cafe society, flying in private planes and partying on the yachts of such Hollywood luminaries as Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper and Charlie Chaplin.

Defiantly, to prove (to himself) that diabetes wasn't going to define his life, Talbert always played with abandon and reveled in partying to excess, often taking his delicate immune system to its limits. Necessarily conscientious about his daily insulin shots and diet, there were nevertheless several times when he overextended himself and fell into calamitous diabetic comas.

In 1941, Talbert was scheduled to play **Bobby Riggs**, the number 1 player in America at the time, in the finals of the Land of Sky tournament in Asheville, N.C. In 32 previous matches, Talbert had never been able to beat the sly, crafty Riggs. Before the match, Talbert stayed up all

night partying and barely had time to change from his tuxedo into his tennis flannels. Hung over with no sleep, Talbert played on adrenaline and willed himself to a straight set victory, 7-5, 6-4, 6-2 - the only time he ever managed to beat Riggs, who went on to notoriety as Billy Jean King's foil in the over-hyped 'Battle of the Sexes' in 1973.

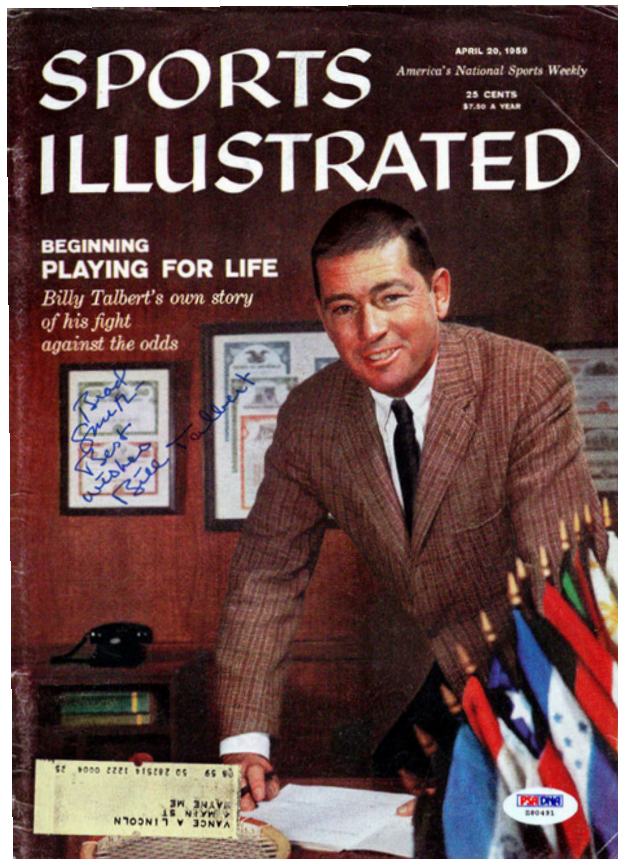


A Young Bobby Riggs

Talbert held his own in singles matches against big hitters like Bill Tilden and Don Budge (coming in second twice in the U.S. Open) but he found his comfort zone in doubles, where he could take advantage of his ball control, finesse and court intelligence. A stylish, shot-making tactician, he won nine Grand Slam doubles titles, five with **Gardnar Mulloy** in men's doubles and four with **Margaret Osborne duPont**. (winner of 37 grand slam titles) in mixed doubles. For thirteen years, from 1941 to 1954, Talbert was ranked in the top ten players in the world, rising to number three in 1949.

He was on the U.S. Davis Cup team six times, fashioning an impressive 9-1 record and was captain of the U.S Davis Cup team from 1952 to 1957. In 1967, he was inducted into the **International Tennis Hall of Fame** in Newport, R.I. along with his nemesis, Bobby Riggs.

A sought-after, talented tennis teacher (he mentored **Tony Trabert** and won a French doubles title with him) Talbert's teaching method was straightforward, based on the tennis truism that only 1 out of 5 points in a match is apt to be earned - that is, hit cleanly through and past the other player. Consequently, 80% of points are scored on opponent errors, forced or unforced. Talbert's philosophy was that the best chance of winning is to put the ball in play and make your opponent commit errors. Never play defensively, **attack by moving forward to the net at every opportunity, since this is the commanding position on the court**. He wrote several tennis instructional books, plus his biography, *Playing For Life*. For several years, he was tennis editor of *Sports Illustrated*.



Sports Illustrated Cover - April 20, 1959

When the Norfolk Country Club was established in 1912, there were two tennis courts in front of the Eldridge Gymnasium it was renting as a clubhouse on Maple Avenue. In 1893, the owners of the gymnasium, NCC charter members, Alice and Henry Bridgman established **The Bridgman Cup** which eventually became the trophy awarded to the winner of the men's Connecticut State Tennis Championship. Norfolk, at the time, was a significant stop on the tennis Circuit attracting top players like Bill Talbert, who won the Bridgman Cup in 1941.

Twenty years later, in 1960, at the behest of **Brower McLintock**, NCC men's singles champion at the time, Bill Talbert was back in Norfolk for an exhibition match to help celebrate the resurfacing of Norfolk's four tennis courts where so much meaningful, great tennis had been played over the years.

Former NCC club president and 1981 NCC men's singles champion, **Rod Perkins**, well remembers the excitement in the air and large, energized member turnout that summer Saturday fifty-eight years ago when Bill Talbert returned to Norfolk at the age of 42. Wearing his bespoke off-white Izod shirt and pleated flannel shorts, Talbert played a few sets with the club's better players and delighted the crowd with his tennis stories and shot-making prowess.



**Bill Talbert (center) With Arnold Fraiman (l.) and Richard Gaines
Norfolk - July 2, 1960**

A successful businessman in the financial sector, Talbert always stayed involved in tennis, becoming executive director of the U.S. Open during the tumultuous 1970s era. Returning from a board meeting of the U.S. Tennis Association in 1992, he was mugged at LaGuardia Airport, suffering a broken arm and pelvis, which precipitated years of declining health. He died in 1999 in Manhattan at the age of 80 having, with his wooden tennis racket, successfully overcome and soundly vanquished the curse of type 1 diabetes.

*Michael Cummings Kelly
Club Historian*