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They Call Him

By Ron Wagner

COACH



CHARLIE REGISTER

Still going strong after four decades at Furman, Paul Scarpa has left a lasting mark on the university — and the game — he loves so much.

When you've been around Furman University

longer than just about anything but the oaks that line Furman Mall, you're bound to leave a legacy. Or, in the case of men's tennis coach Paul Scarpa, several dozen.

There are, of course, the 15 Southern Conference regular-season championships. Twelve conference tournament titles, including this year. Four NCAA tournament appearances. Four individual All-Americans.

Scarpa is the winningest active Division I tennis coach in the country with 780 career victories through the 2006 season. He was recently elected into his — hold on, let's see here — THIRD hall of fame (this time the Southern Tennis, joining the South Carolina Tennis and Furman Athletic). He was the driving force behind one of the finest collegiate facilities on the East Coast, the Minor Herndon Mickel Tennis Center.

In his spare time, Scarpa came up with a pair of innovations that have permanently altered the tennis world: a new way of scoring NCAA matches (dubbed the Scarpa System) and a patented clay court line tape that Scarpa named Tenex. And his summer camp is one of the largest and most successful in the country.

Scarpa boasts 40 years worth of remarkably successful and unflinchingly loyal former players who have named everything from children to racehorses after him, and it's easy to argue that Furman will never be fortunate enough to have a better person to represent its athletic department.

Certainly, that's enough to warrant a story in a magazine. But for those who call Coach Scarpa a friend, it's not enough to get to know him. And knowing him is where the real fun begins.

There's Scarpa's easy laugh and lively conversation,

the infectious enthusiasm and bright eyes that hardly seem to belong to someone who recently turned 67.

And then there's The Office.

It may be Scarpa's most impressive creation.

"He's famously disorganized. His office is usually a wreck," Furman president David Shi says with a chuckle.

"Every player, when they come back to school, they want to go look at Coach's office," David Holly '74 adds. "He's got enough stuff in there, more memorabilia . . . he doesn't know what's in there."

Believe the hype. Corner to corner, wall to ceiling, Scarpa's workspace is packed with seemingly everything he's run across in his four decades at Furman, making it all the more remarkable

that he's only been in that particular room since 1996, when the Mickel Center opened.

"What's funny is he used to have an office that was about six by eight [in the old gym], and it was just as messy," says athletic director Gary Clark. "So when he got the big office the mess just expanded. But the remarkable thing is, when you ask him about something he can go to the fourth stack on the wall, about halfway down, and pull out exactly what you asked for."

Rest assured, these are just good-natured jabs. The office is merely one more way Scarpa manages to bring a smile to their faces.

"The word beloved is overdone often, but the more you talk to his former players, beloved is the word that keeps cropping up," Shi says.

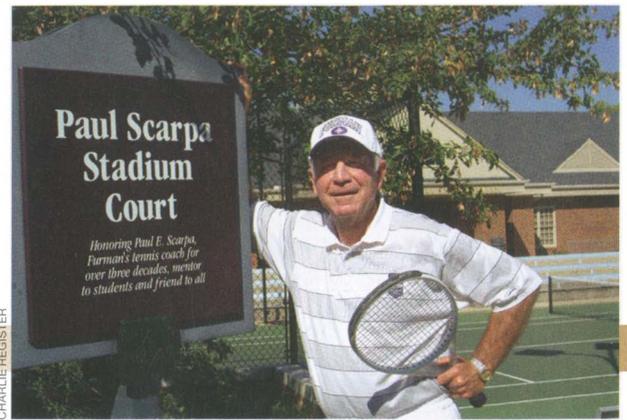
One such player, Dudley Reynolds '75, points out that while Scarpa's organizational system may not work for everyone, it certainly works for him. And when things work for Paul Scarpa, they really work.

"His office is a metaphor for his nonstop brain. There's a method to the madness," Reynolds says. "He's got what you call a big motor, and he's just a high-energy guy. Some of the details of administration elude him. He does get to the right place, but it's really a function of how many things he's trying to do all at one time."

Proving Reynolds' point, Scarpa recently arrived a bit late for a scheduled meeting with a reporter. "I was getting my review from my AD, finding out if I still have a job. We'll see," he cracked. And the sitdown was delayed a moment more when Scarpa was told by his assistant that he needed to produce a receipt for \$12 worth of gas he'd purchased on a recent road trip.

It's clear right away that Scarpa's longevity and success have in no way shielded him from the fact that Furman remains a tiny Division I program operating on a shoestring budget. Like most other coaches at the school, Scarpa has to cut corners and dip into his own pockets. He has to produce \$12 gas receipts, and he has to play without the funding of many of his opponents. Furman offers just 2.5 of the 4.5 NCAA men's tennis scholarship limit.

For someone who starred at Florida State and has been tempted by his share of jobs at schools rolling in the tennis money, it's a little hard to figure out why Scarpa is still in Greenville. At least, it's hard until you actually talk to him. Then the idea of Scarpa doing anything but sitting in a cluttered office less than



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50 feet from the center court that bears his name is the one that becomes preposterous.

"I'd hate to think that I hadn't been offered some jobs because that would mean nobody thinks you're any good. But I have. I've been offered two jobs at large schools, Southeastern Conference schools," Scarpa says. "But I loved Greenville, I loved Furman, I was close to my family, and I was thinking, what would I be doing? I'd be chasing a national championship, and I can name you about five schools that will be competing for that every year.

"People say, 'Golly, you've got a great program. What would you do if you had all four scholarships?' And you know what? I don't know if we'd have done any better. I really mean that."

Scarpa is a South Carolinian through and through,

but the Charleston native didn't start out a Furman man. A state junior champion, he accepted a scholarship to Florida State and climbed his way to No. 1 singles over a career that spanned from 1960-62. One win stands out.

Florida's top player at the time was Jim Shaffer, an SEC champion (and one-time doubles partner of Rod Laver) who still ranks as one of the finest Gator players ever. Scarpa knew him well.

The two first squared off in California when the South Carolina Jaycees paid for Scarpa to represent the Palmetto State in a junior tournament. Unfortunately for Scarpa, he wasn't used to being away from home or being involved in something so big, and he almost forgot to go to his match.

The result was one of the worst whippings he's ever experienced.

"I ran over, jumped onto the court and [Shaffer] said, 'I'm ready.' And I thought, 'This is a nice guy,' " Scarpa says with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. "I had hit seven balls, but I had too much pride to say no.

"So we played, and he was just killing me. And there was a ball that went down the line and I let it go by but I blocked the umpire's view of it. And [the umpire] said, 'How was that?' — asking me — and the ball was out by six inches. And Jim said it was good. I couldn't even argue. I felt defeated. I felt sorry for myself. . . . I just felt like I'd let everybody down."

But he didn't forget. And a few years later, in a display of



The Scarpa family gathered at Litchfield Beach, S.C., last summer. With Paul are, from left, wife Sandy, daughter Elizabeth, daughter-in-law Cynthia Bankston '99 Scarpa, grandson Banks, son Seth. Paul introduced Cynthia and Seth.

Opposite: Hundreds of youngsters hone their games each year at the Paul Scarpa Tennis Camp, a longtime summer staple at Furman.

Corner to corner, wall to ceiling, Scarpa's workplace is packed with seemingly everything he's run across in his four decades at Furman.

the competitiveness that has fueled Scarpa all of his life, he got a chance at revenge. Shaffer lost only 12 collegiate matches, but it likely would have been 11 had he not stoked the wrong guy's fire.

"I won the match, but more than anything I can remember the fuel that I had," Scarpa says. "I just couldn't wait."

Upon graduating from FSU, Scarpa spent time in the military before accepting the head coaching job back at Florida State, where he lasted one year before taking the tennis job at the Naval Academy. He was there for two seasons before new Furman president Gordon Blackwell, a one-time tennis team captain at Furman who was also the president at Florida State when Scarpa was there, lured him to Greenville for the 1966-67 school year.

Early on, Scarpa assisted Frank Selvy with the basketball team in the tennis off-season. He recruited against the likes of Dean Smith and logged thousands of miles trying somehow to land kids everybody wanted. That gig drained even Scarpa's seemingly boundless energy.

"One day, I drove to East Carolina [in eastern North Carolina] and I had to be in Evansville, Indiana, to look at two kids the next day," Scarpa said. "I actually got there about 20 minutes before practice and the coach met me at the door as I was walking in the gym and said, 'Coach Screwpa' — and I knew I was in trouble then — he said, 'We haven't had a decent practice in about two weeks, so I've just closed practice.' And I got in my car and I was like, man, am I an idiot or what? And I had to just re-evaluate."

So he jumped over to the men's soccer program, which Furman was starting from scratch. Needless to say, the days of national prominence were a few years away.

"We had no money. Zero. We were like .500 one year, and I was like, this has got to be the best job I've ever done in my life," Scarpa says. "I remember playing Warren Wilson, that was my first team. And we went up there and they lined up about 23 foreign players, and I honestly believe there wasn't one of those guys who couldn't dribble through our whole team. A kid from Shelby, North Carolina, my goalie, I think he still holds the [school] record for the most saves in a game."

But by the time Scarpa handed soccer over to John Tart in 1981, it had become a force to be reckoned with. Just as tennis already was.

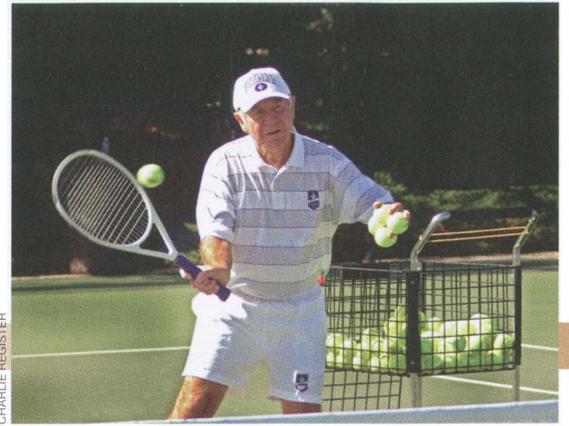


Scarpa turned the corner at Furman with a 23-4 campaign in 1969 that still ranks as perhaps the school's best, and it sparked a sustained run of success in which Furman has won 27 conference regular-season and tournament championships with an .860 winning percentage against current league members.

But it's the performance outside of the conference that Scarpa is perhaps most proud of.

Scarpa has always been obsessed with playing the finest programs in the country, anywhere, anytime. This spring, for instance, Furman started with matches against the murderer's row of Florida, Alabama, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Florida State, Georgia Tech and Georgia. A few years ago Furman beat powerful North Carolina to give Scarpa a win over every Atlantic Coast Conference program his teams have played outside of Maryland (0-3) and Miami (0-1).

Granted, there were a lot more losses, but there's a method to this madness, too. "He sees our schedule, and just like any



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competitor, he thinks well, I didn't get a letter from Georgia, I didn't get a letter from North Carolina, I didn't get a letter from Tennessee," Scarpa says of his recruits, whom he hopes come with a Scarpa-sized chip on their own shoulders as well as a drive to let Scarpa make them better.

Which he does. Ned Caswell '86, for example, started out as Scarpa's No. 13 singles player before he became a two-time All-America. Countless others have gone from nobodies to the team's top three.

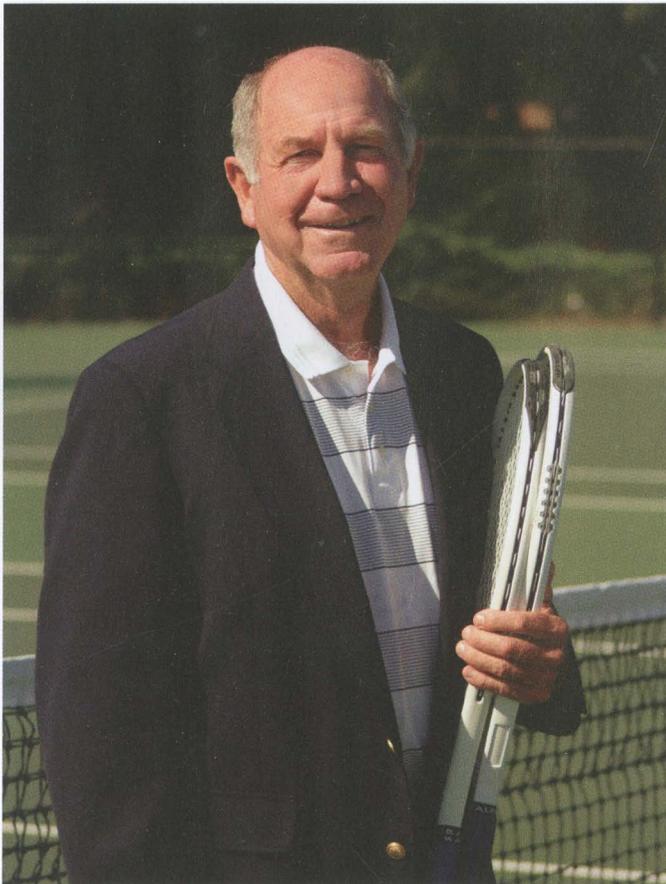
"Scarpa's greatest asset is to take a player and turn him into, really, in some cases, a much better player than they thought they could have been," says Dudley Reynolds, an all-conference singles and doubles player during his student days. "I'm not sure I had the talent that a lot of his players had, but I had never had a coach give me that much time and attention. I give him credit for what success I had as a tennis player."

Even more importantly, Scarpa becomes a big part of his young men's lives off the court, both when they're at Furman and when they're gone. He gushes with pride at the accomplishments of his disciples, and there's plenty to gush about.

"I think you'll find, almost to a player — anybody that's played for Paul Scarpa — some of that optimism and enthusiasm and just passion about what he does rubs off on you. You don't realize it at the time always, but you certainly reflect on it later in life," says Reynolds, president and chief operating officer of Alabama Natural Gas Corporation. "That's certainly been my case. He was a big influence on my life, and I think he's been involved in a lot of players' lives."

"He was the one that got me started. I think my success has everything to do with him," says David Holly, another all-conference player at Furman who is now director of tennis at Greenville Country Club. "Pretty much everything I know about tennis, how to teach tennis, how to deal with people, I've learned from him. He cares probably more for you after you graduate than when you were there. He's always proud."

And the players care back. Scarpa will never forget what Paladin great Sam Schroerlucke '99 said in his acceptance speech upon his induction into the Furman Athletic Hall of Fame in 2004.



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With a spry, wiry frame, he looks like he could hold his own on a college court today, and he shows no signs of losing his drive to see Furman succeed.

"He said, 'The reason that I'm up here is because of my coach. Coach, I want to tell you, you were like a big brother, you were like a father. I remember when I hugged you after my last match. It wasn't because we lost. It was because I knew you were never going to be my coach again,'" Scarpa recalls with red-rimmed eyes. "To go up in front of a lot of people and say something that powerful, I mean, that's pretty special. I'll remember those things."

Not that Scarpa is quite ready to spend his time remembering. With a spry, wiry frame, he looks like he could hold his own on a college court today, and he shows no signs of losing his drive to see Furman succeed.

Retirement? Not yet.

"I get asked that question, and I feel like the timing will be right, when I feel like I have other things that I need to be doing.

"I mean, my whole life has been tennis, playing, coaching, watching," he says. "In camp they did a little skit on me, 'The Dating Game,' and one guy said, 'What about you, Coach Scarpa? What do you like to do?' And the guy pretending to be me said, 'Well, let's see, I like to play tennis, I like to coach tennis, I like to watch tennis.'

"I just like tennis. But I think the time will come and I'll know. I feel like I'm on a track. I don't want anybody to catch our program."

Holly scoffs at the idea of Scarpa ever stepping down. It would be like Furman Mall without all those towering oaks — unimaginable.

"You talk about a perfect fit, that's just a perfect fit for Paul. He loves Furman University," Holly says. "Everybody asks when he's going to retire, but he ain't gonna retire. He wouldn't know what to do."

Neither would anybody else. ●

The author, a 1993 Furman graduate, is a free-lance writer in Hendersonville, N.C.

THE SCARPA FILE

(through the 2006 season)

- ◆ 780 career wins (first among active NCAA Division I coaches)
- ◆ 12 Southern Conference tourney titles
- ◆ 7 conference Coach of the Year citations
- ◆ 128 all-conference selections
- ◆ 70 conference singles champions
- ◆ 29 conference doubles champions
- ◆ Member, U.S. Tennis Association Southern Tennis Hall of Fame
- ◆ Member, South Carolina Tennis Hall of Fame
- ◆ Member, Furman Athletic Hall of Fame
- ◆ South Carolina Professional of the Year, 1975
- ◆ Southern Coach of the Year, 1978
- ◆ South Carolina Coach of the Year, 1990 and 2000

Source: 2006 Furman tennis brochure