



Sports

SECTION C

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Colleges

At 60, she still nets victories

By Paola Boivin
The (Phoenix) Arizona Republic

PHOENIX — Jaws dropped as coach Greg Prudhomme shared the news about his latest recruit.

"We have a new scholarship player," he told his Grand Canyon University women's tennis team.

Yeah?

"She played at Arizona State for three years."

No way!

"She's No. 3 in her age group."

Gasp!

"Oh, and she's 60."

Say what? That's right, The Antelopes' newest addition is 10 years removed from AARP eligibility, was born when Harry Truman was president and can explain the Pythagorean theorem but not how to text message.

"We're working on that," Grand Canyon freshman Stephanie Halde- man said.

Phoenix resident and longtime high school math teacher Sheila Johnson might be four decades older than her opponents, but it hasn't stopped her from making an impact for Grand Canyon in Division II. The oldest active collegiate tennis player in the country is 11-6 in singles play and 7-10 in doubles.

"She's damn good," said Dan McDonald, coach at Mesa State (Colo.). "I told my kids not to freak out because she's an old lady. She'll beat you."

Johnson is part of what appears to be a wave of college programs going old school. Last fall, Michael Frynt, 59, played linebacker for Division III Sul Ross State (Texas). This spring, 53-year-old John Wilson is an outfielder at Division III Penn



By Michael O'Connell

Unique student-athlete: Sheila Johnson, 60, has a 11-6 record in singles play and 7-10 in doubles with Grand Canyon. She's the nation's oldest active collegiate tennis player.

State-Altoona.

What Johnson is doing is no novelty because the well-respected Prudhomme, a former touring pro, doesn't operate that way.

Prudhomme, 37, who played at Arizona State and Arizona, took over at Grand Canyon a month before the fall semester started with hopes of resurrecting a struggling program that had no returning players.

Johnson, meanwhile, was taking private lessons from Prudhomme at a club in Glendale. When Prudhomme's mother mentioned to Johnson that her son's new job would limit his private coaching, Johnson pouted.

"Fine," she mused. "I'll just get a scholarship there and get my lessons for free."

When Prudhomme heard about the glib comment, a light went on. Why not? Johnson had a storied sports background. After a stand-

out high school career in Iowa, she played at ASU from 1963 to '65. She later married and taught algebra at Glendale (Ariz.) High. Although she played tennis socially just once a week, she was known to take on her math students who doubted her prowess on the court and quickly disposed of them.

She longed to return to the game she loved. When Prudhomme approached her, she was excited — at first.

"At my age, I don't sleep real well," she said. "So I'm awake at night thinking, 'This may not be the smartest thing to do.'"

It wasn't just about tennis. Johnson, who already had a master's degree in secondary education, would have to take nine hours of on-campus classes and come up with about \$1,200 the scholarship didn't cover.

Her husband, Mike, 61, loved the idea. Her son, Jeremy, thought she

was nuts. She quickly won her son over along with the team.

"To be honest, I like playing with her the most of anyone," Halde- man said. "She knows more strategy; she places everything perfectly."

Johnson knows her strengths and weaknesses. She lacks the quickness of her opponents but has more finesse. And there's something to be said for decades of experience.

The generation gap has been amusing but not insurmountable. When the team was in Los Angeles recently for a tournament, Johnson and five other players stopped at a restaurant to eat.

"What a lovely family," said a woman who stopped at their table. "Are these your grandchildren?"

Johnson couldn't help but laugh. "It's been great," she said. "I feel young, in class and on the court. I haven't shaved 40 years off my life, but I've shaved a few."

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