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Still playing

John Griffith, 96, plays tennis, golf every week

By Blake Sebring
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One morning about two months ago, Wildwood Racquet Club co-owner Will Cleveland was walking toward the front desk when he happened to look over his shoulder toward the courts. At that split second, an opponent smashed a tennis ball with a big forehand shot at 96-year-old John Griffith. Yes, he's 96 and still plays tennis every week.

"I actually saw him try to dive for the ball like Boris Becker," Cleveland said, laughing. "He stretched out with his racket to hit a backhand volley and he literally lunged and almost dove for it. It's something I wouldn't do at age 52."

Griffith does a lot of things at age 96 that many people half his age wouldn't do. He plays tennis once or twice a week during the colder months and golfs once a week during the warmer ones. His favorite sport is water volleyball, which he turned to after giving up regular volleyball.

Besides never starting to drink or smoke, Griffith said it helps to marry the right person. He certainly did that, staying married to Marjorie for 65 years before she passed away in 2004 at age 88. They have three daughters and four sons, 21 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

"There's not been too much sadness, sickness or injury," he said. "Nothing especially fancy, either, but it's been enjoyable to me anyway."

Griffith started playing tennis as a youngster in 1921 when he and his sister could walk across the street and play at Lakeside Park.

He never took any professional instruction, but they could play whenever they liked on the clay courts.

After graduating from Central Catholic High School and the University of Detroit, Griffith played tennis sporadically, but it wasn't until 1968 in Homeland, Ill., that he joined a league. He's been playing regularly ever since.

"That's about 40 years," he said. "That's long enough, but I should have been a lot better than I am. I don't really play tennis now, but I try and enjoy it."

He plays doubles in the Wildwood senior leagues on Wednesdays and sometimes joins the group for Friday workouts.

Griffith has a wickedly dry sense of humor, such as when he's talking about his teammates.

"The company, some of them aren't so hot," he said with a chuckle. "They're a nice bunch of guys, and I enjoy them. They put up with me, which I appreciate."

Actually, he's beloved by his teammates, except when he hits his wicked forehand drop shot which almost always lands two feet over the net before dying almost immediately. "It drives all the guys nuts because nobody can get it back," Wildwood pro Scott Dredge said. "One of the most remarkable things about him is how well he moves. He gets around extremely well for being 96."

"When he first came out to drill, I did a double-take. I had always heard about him, but I never assumed he would come out to drill. The first thing he told me was, 'I need to get more exercise.' He's pretty remarkable."

For Griffith's 95th birthday, Wildwood gave him a lifetime membership. They also threw him a party for his 96th birthday.

"He still insists on paying for court time and his lessons," Cleveland said. "I don't know how pleased he was that we gave him a membership. He's a self-made guy who pays his own way, and he's the one guy who doesn't see all the fuss, which is kind of cool."

Griffith was an electrical engineer during his work career, though he was also the co-owner of the Griffith's Wawasee Marina for nearly 20 years. He plans to play as long as possible. "I wish I had done more formal exercises when I was younger, but I think playing sports has helped me get along this far," he said. "I've been pretty lucky, and I've never had any troubles with my knees or shoulders. I've always said it was one-third genes, one-third lifestyle and one-third luck. From here on in is gravy."

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