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Washington Township grad Ali Salkowski leaves legacy with Rowan tennis club

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By Austin Odenbrett

A few years ago, Ali Salkowski made plenty of noise as a tennis player for Washington Township High School.

However, when she graduated in 2010 and moved on to Rowan University, there was a significant void. Rowan had no tennis team, not even a tennis club.

During her sophomore year, she decided to change that.

Three years later, the Rowan tennis club just finished up another successful campaign, and is now a key member of the school's sports club community. They also accomplished a number of historic achievements during the 2013-2014 school year, including the team's first top-place tournament finish in club history, while team member Michael Streiger was named Rowan's Club Male Scholar Athlete of the Year for his combined effort on the tennis court and in the classroom.

"It means the world to me to see the club succeed," Salkowski said. "I was going to go away to college to play, then changed my mind and picked Rowan. I was disappointed about not being able to play, so I did something about it. It went from a couple of us hitting the ball around three years ago to now winning tournaments. I just really think it's going to continue to grow, and hopefully one day the school will make it into a varsity sport."

Ali Salkowski, shown here playing for Washington Township's tennis team in 2009, returns the ball to Woodbury's Maddie Graziani during the Gloucester County Time Tennis Tournament. (Staff photo by Lori M. Nichols)

South Jersey Times

The tennis club got its start in 2011, receiving no funding from the school until it proved to have stable leadership and a number of interested participants. Salkowski also led the charge on a community service project and a constitution, both of which are required by the Rowan Recreation Center in order to be considered a sports club.

"I took it upon myself to do all things we needed to do to become a full club," Salkowski said. "We did a Special Olympics and Alzheimer's runs because both are special to me. I would have done all the community service anyway because I wanted to before making the club. It was really a great process."

Salkowski established the club only two years after finishing a standout career for Washington Township in which she helped rejuvenate the tennis program. Most notably, she helped lead the Minutemaids to three consecutive South Jersey Times Girls Tennis Team of the Year awards.

"My career with Washington Township tennis was huge," she said. "I was so close with that team and played a big leadership as captain my last two years, I wanted to do more. When I came in my freshman year, we turned things around and it was great to see that happen, and that was a big part of why I wanted to be apart of a team in college."

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The club has grown from just a handful of members in its first year to now over 20, many of who compete in tournaments against fellow tennis clubs from universities around the area. It's also a member of the USTA's Tennis on Campus program, which helps college students play the game in an intramural-like setting, and lets teams play for regional and national titles. Among the schools Rowan has faced include Penn State, The College of New Jersey, University of Maryland and the University of Delaware. The team practices every week at Bethel Mill Park in Washington Township.

“At first it was hard getting kids out to join,” Salkowski said. “As word of mouth went out we got a lot more people. When we started there was two girls, now they make up half the team.


“We also got close with some other teams and coordinated to play at the same tournaments during the year. We had no rivalries, just a lot of fun with it. Winners or losers, they're all great sports, and we made a lot friends.”

Salkowski graduated from Rowan in May with degrees in early childhood education and writing arts, and handed off the title as president to Mike Kara, a fellow original member of the club and someone who she has great trust in keeping the tennis club going strong.

“I think it's going to continue to grow, because Mike is so on top of everything,” Salkowski said. “We also have really strong underclassmen, and the next few years are looking good. I really have no doubt it will grow.”


Now that she's left the team behind, however, Salkowski said she firmly believes the club was one of the crowning moments of her college experience.

“It ranks at the top, it was best part of my college career,” she said. “I had my friends in my major, but the team was my family. We had a ball, and always we looked forward to the tournaments. I cried not because I'm going to miss college, but because I'm going to miss the team so much. I'm really proud of it.”




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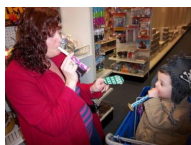
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