

Krejci heads into retirement with a smile

Written by Tom Fruehling
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Wielding his garbage pail-sized Wilson T2000 all-steel racket, Randy Krecji in his tennis playing days was known for his serves.

“I mean he had big, booming serves,” says former doubles partner Mark Fiala, a close friend since they worked summers together at the Veterans Memorial tennis center while in high school. “He could really blast that thing.”

That isn’t the only kind of serving he’s famous for.

“Tennis and eating always went hand in hand with Randy,” adds Dan Breitbach, another old playing pal. “He was a master at both.

“I believe that Randy truly felt his T2000 was able to transfer calories into greater velocity on his first serve.”

At 58 and hanging it up at the end of the month as Harding Middle School principal after 36 years as a much-admired educator in the Cedar Rapids school district, Krecji gave up tournament tennis a few years ago due to lingering leg problems.

But he still loves to eat.

“He’s all the time calling and asking me when we’re going out to the Amanas again,” Fiala says. “He really likes that family-style food where they just keep bringing it on.”

Nothing’s changed, according to Breitbach, who says his friend of more than 40 years has always been partial to buffet-type eateries.

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"I was his apprentice, and my wife Katy said she never spent a more lonely time dining as Randy and I'd kept re-loading on those smorgasbord meals."

With his characteristic smile as wide as a slice of watermelon and infectious good cheer, Krejci revels on living life large.

"I've enjoyed immensely everything I have done in my long career," he says. "Most of all, I have had the tremendous opportunity to work with kids in the classroom and on the athletic fields for all these many years.

"That has truly made my career memorable and enjoyable. I have had a lot of fun, and I've been fortunate to have been associated with so many wonderful people."

If you haven't heard him on the radio, that's how he talks for real. Besides being a teacher, coach, school administrator, athletic conference commissioner, widely regarded multi-sport referee, tennis tournament impresario and a host of other avocations, Krejci for more than 30 years has provided sports reports for WMT-AM 600.

"Alex 'Cadillac' Carr," he intoned a couple of years ago, "found paydirt for the Warriors' third TD by zipping 60 yards through a multitude of defenders with the acceleration of a red Corvette from Pat McGrath Chevyland."

Krejci, by the way, drives a red Corvette. Which is something in itself, considering he grew up the only child of parents who for decades ran the small neighborhood Daniels grocery store across from the near northeast-side park.

"I was what today would be considered a latch-key kid," he says. "My parents, Charles and Lillian, were at the store so much rather than at home. So, of course, I spent a lot of time on the ball diamond at Daniels Park."

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As a youth, his passion was sports. He played them all. And, he says, he was only pretty good at any of them. Early on, though, he did more than just play sports.

The late, great Jack Ogden of The Gazette hired him as a stringer while he was still in junior high. "Basically, I would write three-to-four inch stories (sometimes with a byline) on games where the players were the same age as I was."

He did take part in the first-ever high school state bowling tournament while a junior at Kennedy and was a senior on the Cougar basketball team that won the 1972 state tournament just five years after the school opened.

In high school athletics, however, he made his mark as a tennis player.

"The team was horrible during my sophomore year," he recalls. "In terms of talent, we were pretty lean. We didn't win a meet."

But at 6-foot-3 and with his booming serve, Krejci became good enough by the time he graduated to be offered a modest stipend to play tennis at the University of Northern Iowa.

"They gave me shoes and a little help on rackets. And as a freshman and sophomore, I was given \$50 a year in what they called grant-in-aid.

"Then I won a couple of rounds in a national tournament, so athletic director Stan Sheriff increased it to \$100 in my junior year. It went back down to \$50 the next year."

It was at UNI that he began his long and illustrious career as a referee. Starting at the junior high level, he was officiating varsity football, basketball and volleyball before graduating in 1976 with a double major in physical education and business education.

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At the age of 22, Krejci was the youngest official to ever work a boys state tournament basketball game. He also holds the distinction of working a girls state tournament in the early years that included both six-player and five-player championships.

In a five-girl semifinal, he let one team play with six players for several trips up and down the court before anyone noticed.

“Earl Shostrom, who used to supervise officials at the girls state basketball tournaments, about had a heart attack,” he remembers. “And I figured that might be the last year I would ever receive a tournament.”

But until diabetes sidelined him in 2002, he officiated 26 straight boys state tourneys, 15 girls tournaments and six football playoffs. Still an active volleyball ref, he worked the latest in more than a dozen state appearances last year.

It adds up to 1,743 basketball games, 272 football games and more than 600 in volleyball.

All the while, his main job was as an educator. He started out teaching at McKinley Middle School, spent several years at Kennedy and moved into secondary school administration in 1987 after earning a master's at UNI. He's been the principal at Harding since 1998.

“I'm in charge of discipline around here,” explains longtime associate principal Randy Noecker, a friend from their days together on the Kennedy staff. “Randy's just the nicest guy I know. He always focuses on positive things.

“And he's a big believer in recognition. If he's aware of something positive, he calls students in and gives 'em a certificate.”

Noecker says that was Krejci's way when he coached both tennis and volleyball over the years.

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Krejci received a national sports council award for the intramural program he oversaw at Kennedy and another national honor for his contributions to high school sports and fine arts activities.

A member of the Hall of Fame for both the Iowa Tennis Association and Iowa Girls Coaches Association, he's coordinated the girls and boys state tennis tournaments for a dozen years. He's also served as commissioner of the Mississippi Valley Conference since 2000.

"Randy puts his heart and soul into everything he does," notes Breitbach.

In retirement, Krejci doubts that he'll slow down much. With wife Suzanne, a teacher/coach and onetime mixed doubles tennis partner, he plans to spend more time watching daughters Liz (15) and Hannah (11) grow up.

"I'll be totin' them around," he says.

He will continue to be heavily involved in all sorts of high school athletics, including duty as official scorekeeper and announcer at the state softball tournament next month.

And he'll stay connected to the classroom with substitute teaching.

"I'm just a school junkie," Krejci says. "I love being around kids, and I'm a big booster for whatever they accomplish. Besides, I need to keep building up my IPERS (pension) fund."

The big guy still has to eat, after all.