

A Coach for All Seasons

Stress, anticipation, and hope are clearly visible on the faces of the small crowd. No one speaks--even whispers seem deafening. One bright green, fuzzy ball and two players tiredly thwacking it have everyone's attention. Twilight has come and gone and the overhead lights glare down, giving this important stage its own spotlight. Each shot strikes the court with greater weight attached to it than the stroke before. Varsity and JV players, managers, and fans are all wondering: "Can Caleb, playing his heart out on court five, win this decisive match? Can Delta pull out one more regional title?" The words "match point" finally rustle through the nervous group. No one breathes...then comes one last shot...all thirty teammates and managers rush the court. Someone produces scissors and the team cuts down the net. Excitement after such a close victory is easily justified, but why this strange celebration?

Two words: Tim Cleland. But to really answer the question, a trip back through the history of Delta tennis is required. Although the program is renowned for its excellence, it is even better known for its coach. Tim grew up in Columbus, Indiana, later moving to Hope, Indiana, where he attended Hauser High School. He played for both the varsity baseball and tennis teams and was part of the All-State tennis team his senior year. Tim attended Ball State University as a Whiting Scholar, graduated *summa cum laude*, and was a sports journalist for thirteen years. Building on his past tennis experience, Tim started coaching tennis at Delta High School, where he also began teaching journalism a few years later. Tim was recently inducted into the Indiana High

School Tennis Hall of Fame. For the past ten years, Tim has served as the President of the Indiana High School Tennis Coaches Association.

For nineteen years, Tim Cleland has coached the Delta boys' tennis team. He also has been the girls' coach for fifteen years. His work to build a strong program is evidenced by both teams' local dominance. The boys have not lost to a team from Delaware County since 1994. Additionally, they have won seventeen consecutive sectional titles and fifteen consecutive regional titles. While the girls' team has won fewer back-to-back regionals, they possess an impressive string of eighteen straight sectional titles. Both the boys' and girls' teams have placed third at the state level, a remarkable feat for a little school in the middle of a cornfield.

Over thirty-five seasons, Tim has won 640 matches and lost 103, for a winning percentage of 86%. He is also eighth (and rising!) on the all-time victory chart for Indiana high school tennis coaches.

Tim has coached talented players. However, the athletes' skill levels are not the sole reason Delta tennis has such a dynastic tradition. Tim expects 110% from his players, and, more often than not, receives it. He demands integrity, a critical aspect of tennis. Our school has a "Building Foundations" program, highlighting certain character qualities by rewarding athletes who exhibit them with special t-shirts. Tim has wholeheartedly embraced this program and uses it to encourage players to be honest, hard-working, and responsible, both on and off the court. He places emphasis on academic excellence, noting that self-discipline in the classroom transfers to the court.

Delta sometimes plays schools whose players have major attitude problems. They yell, throw racquets, or mistreat their partners. Attitude issues rarely occur when Delta plays because anytime poor sportsmanship results in a point penalty, we run. If one teammate receives a point penalty, the team runs two miles, while the offender runs one. That teammate is doubly penalized--they run the first mile, but can only watch as friends run the extra mile in their stead. Most kids will not disappoint Tim anyway, but this rule teaches that an individual's behavior affects the entire team.

Tim Cleland does not bash people over the head with the Bible. You may not hear from his mouth he is a Christian. But he is such an effective witness that one cannot help but observe and model his behavior. Tim is truly a servant leader. He will not make the team do anything he would not do himself. When the team runs five-court "suicides" for conditioning, he runs too.

Tim has molded the team to feel like a family. Entire families come to the matches. Tim knows them by name and they love him. One player has a one-year-old brother who Tim jokingly calls his "number one singles player for 2024." People happily chat--we do not have brusque, "little-league" parents. Moms, dads, siblings, and grandparents feel comfortable around Tim--he is so considerate and approachable. They cannot help but be drawn into the "tennis family" by his attitude and the way his tennis system operates.

Caleb Austin, the last player on the courts, who pushed the team over the top to win regionals, was not the most talented boy our team has ever seen. But he was playing

to win for Tim--to uphold Delta's long-standing traditions. By the end of that match, little more than sheer heart kept Caleb going; heart and toughness cultivated by Tim's practices, expectations, and care.

The 2008 team, if one judged by talent, had no reason to walk away with sectional or regional titles. Tim himself said we were "playing on borrowed time." But simultaneously, he called us "the little team that could." He saw the rough, mountainous road ahead, yet convinced the team to keep chugging on. Tim's unfaltering faith kept up the boys' spirit and determination through the season and those tight matches. At the end of those matches, he kept his early season promise: If this team, young as they were, playing more experienced opponents, could keep the sectional-regional streak alive, they could cut down the net.

Just as with the boys' team, Tim never gave up on me. I started tennis my freshman year and was horrible. My mom jokingly said I was not quite sure which end of the racquet to hold. But Tim said that some of his best players were terrible as freshmen, which I found immensely encouraging. Older players reached out to younger ones, a trait fostered by Tim's example of including everyone.

Tim did not give up on me last fall, either. I tore my ACL and underwent knee surgery with just enough time to rehabilitate for girls' season. Yet Tim did not automatically assume I would not play. Two or three times a week, he asked how I was doing and would either make a funny joke or an encouraging statement about it. He did not question my capabilities. He neither pampered my return nor made my gradual

Kristen Smith
Senior
Delta High School
Mr. Kip Omstead
Mr. Tim Cleland
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transition back into tennis unnecessarily difficult. Through his help and instruction, I earned my first varsity letter that spring.

Tim Cleland is my coach, teacher, role model, and friend. He inspires and encourages, motivating athletes and students alike to excellence. Lessons learned on the court extend into daily life. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Hoosier lives have been impacted by his work. Though Tim would never call himself a hero, this quiet, humble man defines the word perfectly to me.