

Stuart and Freda Lawson: (both deceased)

Stuart and Freda Lawson were unique Canadians. They loved the sport of badminton and played regularly as well as entering tournaments. However, while in their 30's playing in a church hall, they had a dream, and that dream was to build a proper badminton club.

After a considerable struggle, the Lawsons put their dream to the test. They designed and built a unique four-court badminton facility in North Toronto, the Strathgowan Badminton Club in 1939. The club was unusual in many ways. Unlike most private clubs, it was designed and built just for badminton. Although lacking the luxurious quarters of multi sport clubs, the badminton facilities were excellent. The main unusual feature was that the club was owned by Stuart and Freda Lawson.

The second World War made the club operation difficult because so many young men and women were in the service. However, the club prospered and attracted many of the best players in Toronto. The primary reason was Stuart's intuition that the RSL shuttlecocks from England were going to be in short supply because of the war, and he proceeded to build up a stock of shuttles from all sources.

By 1942, most clubs had no stock of goose-feather shuttles and players were forced to use shuttles manufactured from chicken feathers. The net result was that players went to Strathgowan.

Stuart also got into the business of re-making used shuttles. All used shuttles were collected and were either used for rebuilding or providing feathers for rebuilding. He concocted his own glue and shellac and turned out hundreds of "remade" shuttles in his workshop. These "remakes" were sold at half the price of new ones. They were considered to be better than the originals!

In post-war years, Strathgowan became outstanding in a couple of ways; first for the development of a great junior program, and as host to North America's finest invitation tournament – the Strathgowan International Invitational. This tournament attracted not only the best players in North America but the best in the world.

The junior program was Freda's love and she did a fabulous job in its development. At any time there were over 100 juniors involved. The Lawsons believed in the principal that a good junior program required good organization, supervision, instruction, encouragement, and, above all – inspiration. The juniors at Strathgowan were taught, besides the game itself, some fundamental lessons in sportsmanship. The Strathgowan juniors were known – and feared – as the best in the area. Some of them progressed to city champions, and to provincial, national and international level. The Lawsons were convinced that the first small club tournaments were as important, in their own way, as anything on a larger scale – even the Strathgowan International Tournament!

For the juniors, to see and meet the international stars that visited Strathgowan was a fantastic experience, one that they never forgot. How could they forget meeting and actually playing with the great Eddy Choong of Malaysia.

During the war, about 1944, many Canadian servicemen and women were home on leave. The Lawsons advertised in the Toronto central railway station and in all service clubs, that those in uniform were welcome to come to Strathgowan and play badminton. Appropriate equipment etc. would be supplied. The servicemen responded and it was not unusual to see air force and navel officers of all ranks enjoying a game of badminton at the club.

At this time the idea was hatched for holding a tournament – since there were none during the war years. From “just a tournament” to an international contest was the next step and lo and behold, plans were laid for the “Strathgowan International Invitation”. The tournament was inaugurated in 1945. Jack Purcell was the Referee. The tournament drew many players from the U.S. as well as Eastern Canada. It was a resounding success. In the years that followed, countless stars in the world of badminton visited the club. The Lawson’s sold the club in 1965 and retired. The club is no more, but the memories shall live on in perpetuity and the records will be ingrained forever in Canadian badminton history.

Stuart did not confine his activity to running the Strathgowan; indeed he was extremely active in badminton organization. He served as President of the Toronto and District Badminton Association, and moved on to the Presidency of the Ontario Badminton Association in 1947, serving until 1950. Then he took on the Presidency of the Canadian Badminton Association. In 1967 he was elected as Honourary Vice President of the Association.

Stuart and Freda Lawson were an incredible badminton duo. They followed through on their dream and built a badminton club, not any old club, but a very special club – Strathgowan. They struggled and nursed it through difficult times, overcoming the adversities with intuition, foresight, and hard work. Then they turned their attention to junior development and the introduction and maintenance of the most famous Invitation Tournament in North America. Their 25- year contribution to Canadian Badminton is quite immeasurable. In the vernacular of the day, Stuart and Freda Lawson will long be remembered as the “badminton hosts with the most”. They were a phenomenal team.