



Beyond The Law: Elizabeth Stouder

Interview and profile photo by Daniel J. Murphy
Courtesy photos provided by Elizabeth Stouder

Arthur Ashe, the legendary tennis champion, once remarked that eventually a player gets to the stage in life where “going for it is more important than winning or losing.” Beth Stouder, who just returned from the United States Tennis Association (USTA) national championships, personifies this statement. Her team, the Blue Hares, was among only seventeen women’s teams in the country to compete in Tucson, Arizona for the national prize in their league segment. Although the Blue Hares returned to Maine without the Winner’s Cup, they shared an unforgettable experience. Stouder, who otherwise practices law at Richardson, Whitman, Large & Badger in Portland, recently spoke with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss her interest.

MBJ: Please tell our readers about your interest in tennis.

ES: Where I grew up in the Midwest, tennis was like tag. Everybody played tennis. It was free and we had lots of public courts. A lot of my friends went on to play competitive tennis in high school and college. I think I played a little bit on a team in high school, but then I didn’t play again. I stopped playing until about 15 years ago.

MBJ: What prompted you to get back into the sport?

ES: One of my friends invited me to play. The people next door to her had a private court they allowed her to use. We started going out occasionally early in the morning because we were both early risers. We’d go out and play at

6:00 or 6:30 in the morning. Then, we’d shower and go to work.

MBJ: How did you develop your interest in the game?

ES: Mary Gray runs a clinic in Falmouth. She’s a terrific instructor. I’m a Falmouth resident, and the town offers community programs at very reasonable prices. I said, “Oh this would be fun,” and my friend and I signed up for it. At the clinic, we started meeting other tennis players. After a couple summers of that, I realized I didn’t want to stop playing tennis in the winter, so I asked somebody that I met where she played in the winter. She suggested signing up to take lessons from Mary Gray and joining a league. I did everything she said and I became an addict.

MBJ: How did you make the leap to tennis addict?

ES: Well, you just start playing and then you want to play more. Pretty soon you’re looking for people to play with and figure out different groups and leagues. I took lessons for several years, both some private lessons and some lessons with a friend, from a wonderful pro. It’s so great to get out there and play. You feel like you are getting better at it and you can be active. I like to be physical.

MBJ: What is it about tennis that brings you joy?

ES: I love tennis because I do not think about what’s on my computer, what’s going on with my family, or what’s going on in a case. I get out on a tennis court and think, “Just hit me the ball!” I



Courtesy photo provided by Elizabeth Stouder

want to hit the ball and figure out how to win the next point. So, for us as lawyers, it's really nice to have a diversion. I used to do some long distance biking, and I walk. With all of those activities, though, my mind still spins. With tennis, I really can't do that. You have to be in the moment with tennis. Even if your mind is wandering a little bit for five minutes, after 10 minutes, it's not wandering any more. Tennis keeps me really focused.

MBJ: When you got back into it 10 years ago, did you have any breakthrough moments?

ES: Well, there are breakthrough moments when you beat particular people that you didn't expect to beat. The pro that I was just talking about did a terrific job developing my serve. I think sometimes when people see it, they still say, "Oh, Chan gave her that serve." But actually, I had a period of time that I really struggled because I lost track of my forehand. A forehand is supposed to be the go-to shot, but a backhand was always easier for me. Somehow, I just lost couldn't hit a decent forehand so I

was running around it a lot. I went to take a clinic at Amelia Island in Florida on vacation with my husband. They put me on a court with an instructor and four other people. We were hitting balls and it was very helpful. The instructor, Joan, commented that I had a messed up a forehand for the level of my game. She helped me fix my forehand. I took some more lessons with her and then learned she taught in Vermont during the summer. So for a while, I followed Joan around, taking lessons in a couple of different states. I said, "Please, do not think of me as your stalker." I've unfortunately lost track of her, but she basically choreographed a forehand for me and something clicked. It has been much more solid since then.

MBJ: Can you describe your current involvement with tennis leagues?

ES: Yes, the USTA, which is the United States Tennis Association, runs a huge network of competitions in this country, including professional tennis. When you become a member of the USTA, you are entitled to play in

their leagues. We have a big network of USTA teams in Maine, and you can play in women's, men's and mixed-doubles leagues. The teams are divided into certain levels and age groups. When you first start playing tennis, you can either self-rate or have an instructor watch your game and rate you. Then, once you've played a few matches, the computer sort of adjusts. For example, if you rate yourself too high or too low, they'll adjust your level. So a lot of intermediate club players play at a 3.5, while 4.0 is a more advanced level. So I play on several different teams. The women's teams are grouped by age, 14 and over, 40 and over, 55 and over. But there's no upper limit. An 18-year old can't play on a 40 and over team, but an 80-year old can. So our women's team for 40 and over women has been playing together for several years. Mary McArdle, who is a paralegal at Murray Plumb & Murray, happens to be the captain of our team. The other team members are non-lawyers. I love this group of women. We've played together for several years, and we usually do well in Maine.

MBJ: How does the tournament system work in the USTA leagues?

ES: You compete in your state during a particular season. And then if you win your league, you go up to the next level, you go to districts and then you start playing people from other states. If you win at districts, then you go on to sectionals for your region. My women's 3.5 level team for 40 and over women won in Maine, in districts, and then in the New England Sectionals in Springfield, in August. And now we go on to nationals in October, where we will play all of the winners from all of the other regions—there are 17 of them. The winners from each region play off and compete for the national ranking. It's a big deal for our team to get all the way to the nationals.

MBJ: Have you had any intersection between your legal world and then your world on the courts?

ES: Some people have asked me for advice or come to me with cases, and I've helped some find a lawyer if I couldn't handle their type of case. There are quite a few lawyers who play tennis. There are some terrific players. But the other real plus to this—besides the fact that I like tennis so much, is that we have met fabulous people. I have a huge group of really good friends that are not lawyers and they're people that

I never would have met any other way, but they're wonderful people. We have a really good, active group of friends. We do all sorts of things including playing tennis.

MBJ: Any particular games that were memorable for you?

ES: Well, I'll tell you the most recent one. When we went to sectionals, they're always in the Springfield area, and they take over a bunch of courts. Our team played at the Mount Holyoke College courts. We played our match on Friday and won, and we played our match on Saturday and won. Each team match is five individual matches, two singles and three doubles. So you have to win best out of five for each match to win the match for your team. So we were 2 and 0 going into the third day, and that meant we won on Sunday, we knew we would go to nationals. And we all went out, and there are like 20 courts going of people, not just your team, there are a lot of matches going on. But you and your team are playing five matches with one other team. So we all went out—the two singles players, the three doubles teams went out, and my partner and I were playing doubles. It was so humid and hot that day that there are games that I am not sure I remember—I just told myself to focus and hit the ball. So we didn't know what had happened to

our four other matches, but we knew that we'd lost one of them because we heard their team cheering really loud when they left the court. But Fili and I did know that all of our teams were off the court. So four matches had finished, and we were the only match still left on the court, but we didn't know what shape our team was in, and you don't want to know. My job is to win the next point. I never want the pressure of knowing we're the deciding match. But we were in fact the deciding match. Our team was split 2 and 2 so that when we finished our match, that was it, we clinched our win, and we clinched going to the nationals. We won the first set 6-4, and we were up 5-2 in the second set, and my partner was rock solid. She served for the first set and she served for the match at 5-2, and she closed it out. So when we hit that final shot that won the match, we walked off and we found out right away that we'd been 2 and 2, and we put it 3 to 2 so we won.

MBJ: What is the best advice that you've ever received?

ES: Be yourself. Nothing else works.



Courtesy photo provided by Elizabeth Stouder



Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Business Law and Litigation Practice Groups, where his practice concentrates on business and commercial litigation matters.

Beyond the Law features conversations with Maine lawyers who pursue unique interests or pastimes. Readers are invited to suggest candidates for Beyond the Law by contacting Dan Murphy at dmurphy@bernsteinshur.com.