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The Mother of All Streaks

Miller Place High has never lost a scholastic match—that's right, never • by Jim Harmon

WIN NUMBER 358 resembled many of the previous 357 victories by the Miller Place (N.Y.) High badminton team. On April 2 the Panthers won all 13 singles and doubles matches against visiting Patchogue-Medford High. That's how Miller Place beats most of its opponents in Suffolk County, on Long Island. The No. 1 boys' singles match was typical: 18-year-old Patchogue senior Mike Knauer got a 20-minute lesson in the thrust and parry of high-caliber badminton from 15-year-old Miller Place sophomore Richie Kanowsky.

Kanowsky, 5' 3" and 110 pounds, sports a wedge haircut and walks with attitude, but he was careful not to appear to be toying with Knauer. He moved the birdie and his 6-foot, 202-pound opponent around the court, feathering drop shots just beyond Knauer's lunging reach, firing 100 mph overhead smashes past Knauer and, after some of their rallies, leaving the older boy shaking his head in amazement and frustration. "Yes! I got the serve!" Knauer growled when one of his shots finally hit the floor on Kanowsky's side of the net.

Kanowsky won the best-of-three match 15-2, 15-1. On the last point he sent Knauer sprawling onto the floor, where



GREG FOSTER (2)

Senior McNamara (left) is the team's old pro, while sophomore Kanowsky (above) is its prodigy.

he lay facedown for a few seconds before picking himself up and shaking Kanowsky's hand. "The kid's good," Knauer said, sizing Kanowsky up again. "You don't get anything past him. He's only 15?"

"I just try to keep the rallies going," said Kanowsky dryly, taking another look at Knauer. "He's only 18?"

"There's not a lot of drama to these events," said Miller Place's diminutive coach, 51-year-old Pat McCarrick, resplendent in a red sweat suit with a stitched shuttlecock on the back.

"It's a learning experience every time we play them," said Patchogue coach Terri Breen, whose players have yet to win one individual match against Miller Place in her

three seasons as coach. "Their experience is overwhelming."

So is Miller Place's record. As of May 3 the Panthers had won 365 consecutive matches since McCarrick fielded the school's first varsity team (then just for girls) 23 years ago. It's the longest-known winning streak in the history of U.S. professional, collegiate or scholastic sports.

High school varsity badminton isn't widespread in the U.S.; it's played in only seven states by some 350 schools. The National Federation of State High School Associations doesn't even write rules for the sport or list it in its record book. Miller Place's success is that of a big fish in a small and shrinking pond. The Panthers' schedule is limited to the six other high school badminton teams in Suffolk County; a few years ago, before local budgets were cut, there were more than a dozen. Miller Place has won every county championship since the first one, in 1975.

Unfortunately, that's as far as the Panthers can go. There are 30 high school teams in neighboring Nassau County, but Miller Place hasn't played any of them since the last all-Long Island championship, in 1983. There's no New York State championship, either, because there are not enough schools represented across six of the 11 state sections to satisfy the requirements for staging a tournament.

So Miller Place steps up to better competition by sending a club team to contests around the country and to the Yonex U.S. Junior National Badminton Championships each spring. Since 1978 the Panthers have won 116 gold medals in national age-group singles and doubles. During the last six years the Miller Place club team has had the help of two world-class coaches, first, Jian Liu of China and,



Badminton

most recently, Steve Butler of England.

McCarrick started playing badminton as a physical education major at Syracuse University, from which she graduated in 1966. She took to the game quickly and became one of the top-ranked women in the country. When she arrived at Miller Place as a phys-ed teacher in 1970, McCarrick and then athletic director Don Pranzo agreed that junior high and high school students would get more out of their gym classes if they concentrated on one sport each semester. They also agreed that badminton was a good sport to start with,

each night. "You'd hit 20 serves or play a game to five, then go to the back of the line and wait for 20 minutes," says senior Dawn McNamara, 18, who has played on the Miller Place varsity since the seventh grade and is now the Panthers' No. 1 girls' singles player and a two-time national doubles champion. "I think I spent more time in line than I did playing. But everybody loved it."

McCarrick won three 35-and-over nationals singles titles, but in 1990, slowed by a bad back, she stopped training. Not long afterward she heard that Liu, who was coaching the Sri Lankan national team, was looking for a job in the U.S. McCarrick hired him to help coach the club and start-

match. Kanowsky had beaten Lai a month earlier in the New England Junior Open tournament. In Atlanta they split the first two games, but, unable to find his rhythm, Kanowsky fell behind quickly in the third and lost to Lai 15-8. "I beat myself," he said afterward. "I gave him a lot of easy shots. I gave him a lot of points."

Overall, it was a successful though less-than-stellar junior nationals for Miller Place, which won a single gold medal—eight fewer than last year—and 12 silvers. (Their archrival, the club from Manhattan Beach, Calif., won 13 golds and two silvers.) Kanowsky finished second in the under-16 boys' doubles with partner Ken Claffie and won a second silver medal in mixed doubles, with Brown.

The Panthers' star was 18-year-old Katie Maloney, the club's winningest player in nationals competition. Maloney is an all-county setter for the Miller Place girls' volleyball team, and in a volleyball game eight days before the junior nationals she had severely sprained her right ankle. With the ankle iced, taped and supported by an air cast, she outwitted Jia Hu of Palo Alto, Calif., 11-7 and 11-0, to win the under-18 girls' singles, her 12th national title in six years.

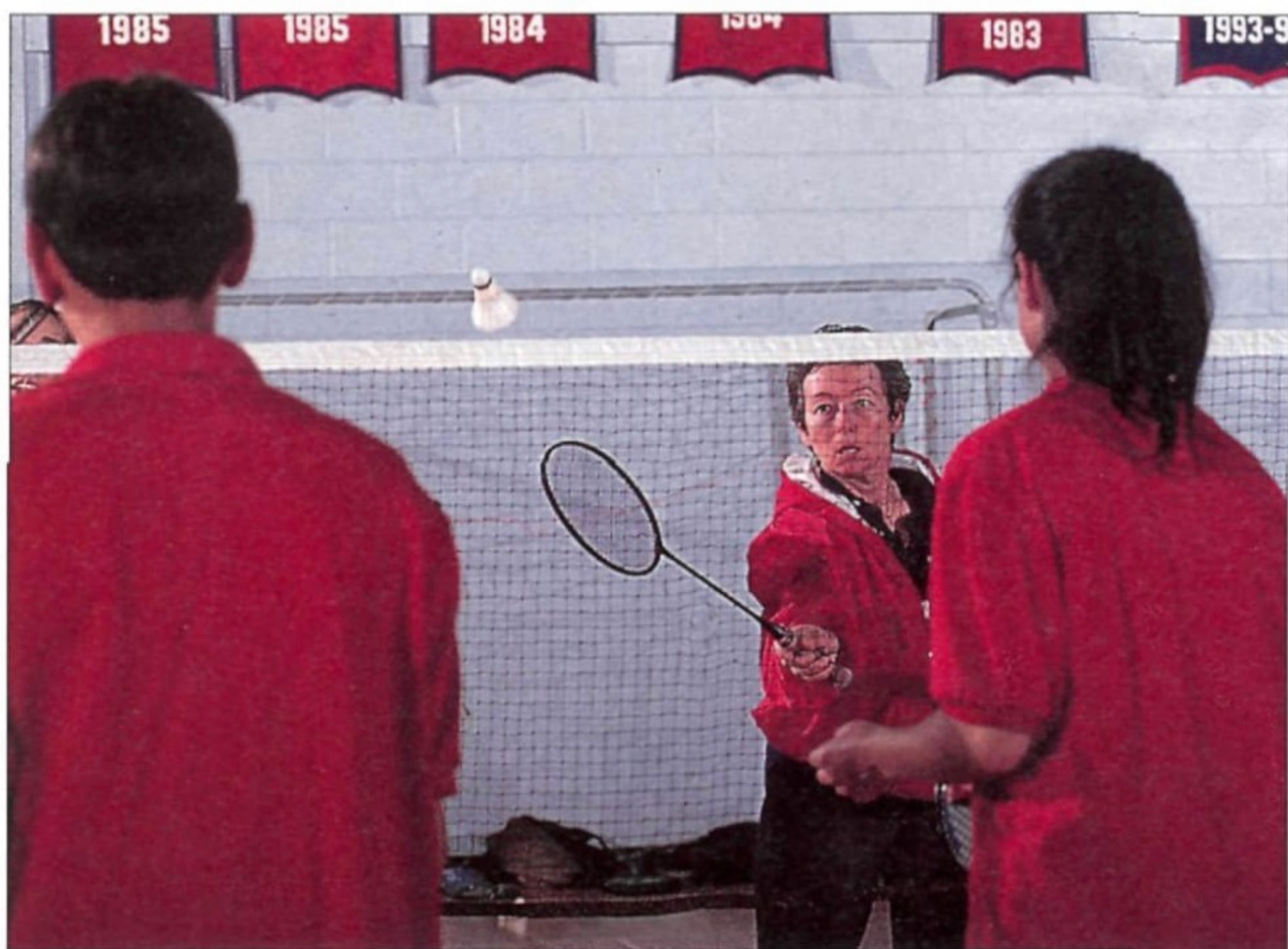
"I guess if I'd just stuck to badminton, this would've been easier," Maloney said, making it clear that she was happier to have done it the hard way. "Honestly, playing for the high school team gets old when you've been killing your opponents since eighth grade."

Despite their one-sidedness, the Panthers' high school matches are hardly grim affairs. Opposing coaches and players have learned

to find the fun in certain and swift defeat. Commack High, Miller Place's 250th victim, showed up for the match wearing T-shirts that said 250 on the front and MILLER WHO? on the back. And at some point in almost every match there's a triumphant shout of "I scored a point!"

Barring, say, a teamwide flu attack, the Panthers' winning streak will continue, though it will do so without Butler. After the junior nationals, he told McCarrick that he had accepted the position of head coach of the U.S. national team. That means McCarrick will be looking for a replacement. She'll consider all applicants, but only big winners need apply. ■

Jim Harmon, a freelance writer from Long Beach, N.Y., is strictly a backyard badminton player.



McCarrick (with racket) started the program, and the streak, when Richard Nixon was president.

since the basic skills it requires are easy to learn. For 26 years every seventh-grader at Miller Place has played a half year of badminton in gym class.

McCarrick found that to compete in tournaments she needed more time to play and better players to train with, so she started an after-school club, inviting anyone interested in the game—junior high students, high school students, varsity team members and even their parents—to play in the evenings. She sent the older kids to play exhibitions for elementary school classes, and before long there were 75 people batting birdies around the gym

ed charging hefty dues to pay him a salary. When Liu left in 1994 to coach in Chicago, the Miller Place club hired Butler, 32, who had been a member of the British national team for 12 years.

Butler and McCarrick took 28 players to this year's junior nationals, which were held April 4-7 at the Georgia State University Sports Arena in Atlanta, site of the upcoming Olympic badminton competition. It was the fifth national tournament for Kanowsky, who won a gold medal in the under-14 mixed doubles two years ago with teammate Alison Brown. This year he was seeded third in the under-16 boys' singles. Four days after his romp over Knauer he found himself staring across the Georgia State net at a familiar rival, second-seeded Trevor Lai of Dover, Mass., in a semifinal