

# OTTAWA TENNIS AND LAWN BOWLING CLUB

## Performance Tennis, a gathering place for tennis lovers



Gary and Valerie Hawkes have been members of the Ottawa Tennis and Lawn Bowling Club since 2004. PHOTO BY MORGAN JOHNSON-DUGAY

By Janet Uren

Neighbourhood shops used to double as community gathering places. Mostly that's a thing of the past, except at one little tennis shop on Leonard Avenue, where the old-fashioned feeling of neighbourliness has returned.

Gary Hawkes lives next door to the business he founded in 2016 at 70A Leonard Avenue and called Performance Tennis. The name signals his commitment to inclusivity in the sport. "I chose the name because it's for everybody. Everybody wants to improve. It's not about 'high performance,' or 'low performance.' And I like that it's bilingual, the same word in both French and English."

Performance Tennis was never part of some grand plan, though Gary did have it in mind to follow his government career with some kind of small business. "When I bought the house on Leonard in 2004, it had an annex I knew would be perfect for that," says Gary. "Otherwise, the business just kind of happened. I started out stringing racquets, and it evolved."

Like many local business people, Gary has been challenged by the

pandemic. Except in periods of lockdown, however, he has seen increasing demand. "Tennis is one of the sports that people can play safely during COVID-19, so once the club re-opened during the summer" – the Ottawa Tennis and Lawn Bowling Club (OTLBC) on Cameron Avenue – "we were really busy. And it was not just long-term tennis players. New people were trying tennis; others were returning to the sport."

Gary, who grew up in Winnipeg, was not a tennis player when he came to Ottawa as a young civil servant. "I say I have always loved the sport but, in fact, I didn't play as a kid. The first time I picked up a racquet was on an overseas trip to West Africa. Some young men at the hotel were hanging around the court, looking for a game, so I tried it out." He was sold. In 2009, during one of their postings home, he and Valerie joined the OTLBC, where she is just as enthusiastic about swimming laps as he is about tennis.

That was when the idea for a new business began to germinate. "I learned how to string racquets at a Tennis Canada seminar," Gary recalls. "They used a stringing machine that was new at the beginning of the day and

'used' at the end, so they offered it for sale. I bought it and stuck it in the annex. Once I had the machine, people started coming. And I thought, if I'm stringing racquets, maybe I could offer some other tennis-related products and services."

As a member of the OTLBC, for the last decade or so, Gary Hawkes has made his mark, especially on the junior programs. "I opened my mouth," he says wryly. "I was playing with Ron Stein, president of the club at the time, and I looked around and saw mostly older people on the courts. I said, 'There aren't many children, are there?' And he said, 'You're right. Why don't you do something about it?'"

It turned out that the time was ripe for a new appeal to juniors, with more and more families with children moving into Old Ottawa South. As well, it was a time of building excitement around tennis, with more television coverage and some real stars emerging nationally. There was also the intrinsic appeal of tennis, with families always looking for something they can do together. "And some parents are looking for a safer alternative to hockey."

The challenge at the club was to develop programs that would serve younger players and encourage families to join. Gary looked to Tennis

Canada to see what they were doing for juniors, and he adapted programs under the heading of "Let's Play."

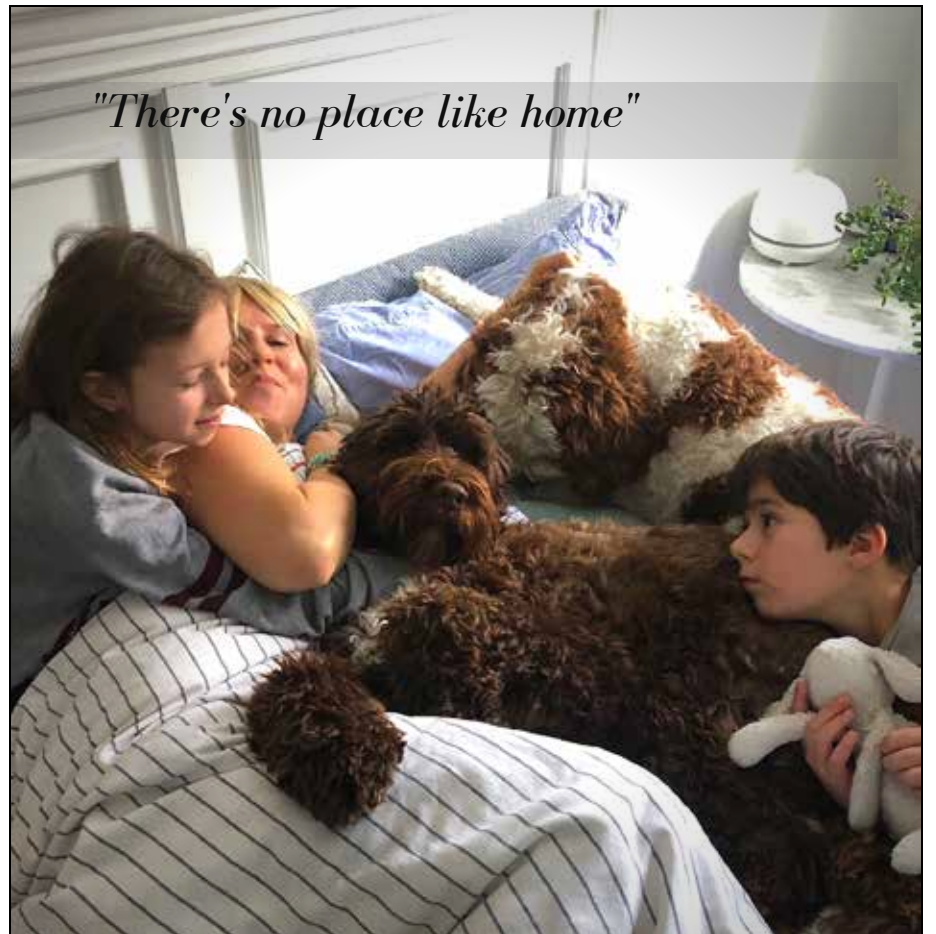
"Partly it's about the equipment," Gary explains. "Kids, especially kids under 10, are not strong enough to play with large racquets, so we use scaled-down equipment and a smaller court. We also introduce a lot of fun and games to replace traditional approaches."

Gary's efforts have borne fruit, as have those of Jim Fawcett of Hopewell Avenue, who succeeded Gary during his final posting. The result? There are more children at the club now than ever before. "We still have work to do," says Gary, "but we have made real progress."

Gary Hawkes is a happy kind of shopkeeper. He has fallen into the right kind of business, at the right scale and in the right neighbourhood. "I love what I'm doing. The shop, and also the club, are the main part of my social life now," he says. "People come into the shop, and we chat, sometimes about tennis, sometimes about other things."

It sure looks like the old-fashioned shop – a kind of neighbourhood gathering place – is back in Old Ottawa South.

Janet Uren is a professional writer living in Ottawa.



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Gary Hawkes stands outside his tennis shop at the corner of Leonard and Hopewell, where his love of tennis has morphed into a small neighbourhood business. PHOTO BY VALERIE HINDLE