

Double Trouble

Tennis Partners Return from Rotator Cuff Surgery to Win Doubles Title



Jim (left) and Cory are the oldest combined pairing to win the doubles championship in the history of the International Country Club in Chantilly, VA.

International Country Club tennis partners Cory and Jim are not your ordinary doubles champions. At 57 and 58, they are the oldest combined pairing to win the championship in the club's history. What makes it even more remarkable: they came back to defend their title after both had rotator cuff surgery.

Cory's injury took place several years ago during warm-ups for an interclub match. He felt a sudden, sharp pain in his right shoulder while hitting an overhead shot. At first he thought he'd pulled a muscle and rested it for a few weeks. But when he got back on the court and tried to serve, the pain was still there.

Cory consulted fellow club member Keith Lawhorn, MD, at Commonwealth Orthopaedics, who initially recommended physical therapy. When the pain persisted, and an MRI revealed a tear, Cory opted for a surgical repair.

"Surgery was necessary if I wanted to return to playing tennis competitively – the way I am used to," he says. "It helped that Dr. Lawhorn is a tennis player and understands how important tennis is to me in my life. It gave him great insight into what it would take to return me to a high level of play."

Jim had partially torn his rotator cuff 30 years earlier while on the U.S. Olympic handball training team and the injury had worsened over time. When he hit a routine shot during a mixed doubles match, he felt a pop and some pain in his left shoulder. Although he was able to complete play, he woke up the next morning in severe pain, barely able to lift his left arm.

Encouraged by Cory's experience, Jim consulted Dr. Lawhorn, too. "I wanted surgery right away, but Dr. Lawhorn recommended trying some non-operative options first, including rehabilitation to provide strengthening of the surrounding tissue," he says. Ultimately, however, Jim ended up having a surgical repair.

"Both Cory and Jim had moderate-sized rotator cuff tears involving their dominant shoulders, and had conventional true double-row repairs, performed with an all-arthroscopic technique," Dr. Lawhorn explains. "Both patients underwent a conservative rehabilitation protocol, beginning physical therapy four weeks after surgery and progressing to strengthening and tennis ground strokes at six to nine months. They returned to full play, including unrestricted serving, at one year."

The rotator cuff is a group of muscles and tendons that stabilizes the shoulder joint and helps raise and rotate the arm. Surgery is used to treat a rotator cuff tear if the injury is very severe or if nonsurgical treatment has failed to sufficiently improve strength and movement. Thanks to advancements in arthroscopic techniques and materials, surgeons can perform successful rotator cuff repairs on patients of all ages and activity levels using very small incisions – procedures that might not have been possible 20 years ago.

Ideal candidates are those with good quality rotator cuff tissue who suffer an acute tear. After the repair of acute tears, symptom relief and functional recovery is high. For older patients with natural degeneration, the decision to have surgery is based on a number of factors including symptoms, function, repairability and tissue quality.

“As we age, the rotator cuff thins like a pair of worn jeans,” explains Commonwealth surgeon Thomas Klein, MD. “It happens slowly over time, getting thinner and thinner, until it finally tears. Some patients can function very well without surgery. But others – especially those who experience night pain or marked weakness – require a surgical repair.”

Rehabilitation is a slow process that is key to a successful outcome. It begins with four to six weeks of immobilization in a sling, followed by a month of passive physical therapy to regain range of motion, and several months of active therapy to improve strength and control.

“Returning overhead athletes with rotator cuff tears to their pre-injury level of function is a challenge,” says Dr. Lawhorn. “In fact, tennis players such as Jim and Cory are some of the most challenging patients to return to this high level. The rehabilitation, as well as the time course for return, must be conservative.”

Both men appreciated this approach. “It was absolutely 100% the right thing to do,” Jim says. “At the time, I was pushing for a faster



Cory (left) and Jim remain doubles champions at their club after both having rotator cuff surgeries.

return, but Dr. Lawhorn refused to let me do too much too soon and now my shoulder feels better than it ever has before.”

Cory, who feared his injury had ended his tennis career, was equally grateful he did not rush back to the court. “When I finally attempted a gentle serve, and felt absolutely no discomfort whatsoever – relief just washed over me. It felt like I had a brand new arm,” he says.

The pair put their repaired shoulders to the ultimate test in February, winning International’s doubles championship for the second time in four years. Everyone they played was younger, including some father-son teams. Their goal is to defend their title – and set new combined age records – for as long as they can.

“We feel so fortunate and owe it all to the excellent care we received from Commonwealth Orthopaedics and Dr. Lawhorn,” Jim says. “He is one of my true heroes.”



Thomas J. Klein, MD, earned a BA in biology from Washington and Jefferson College before going on to graduate from medical school at Georgetown University School of Medicine. He completed his surgical internship in Danville, Pennsylvania, and did an orthopaedic surgery residency at Georgetown University Medical Center.



Keith Lawhorn, MD, graduated with a BA in Chemistry from the University of Virginia and continued his education at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, where he earned his medical degree. He completed a general surgery internship and orthopaedic residency at the Medical College of Virginia. Dr. Lawhorn served on active duty in the U.S. Air Force for eight years, reaching the rank of Lt. Colonel.

For full biographies and a complete directory of the physicians at Commonwealth Orthopaedics who perform these and other procedures visit our website at www.c-o-r.com.