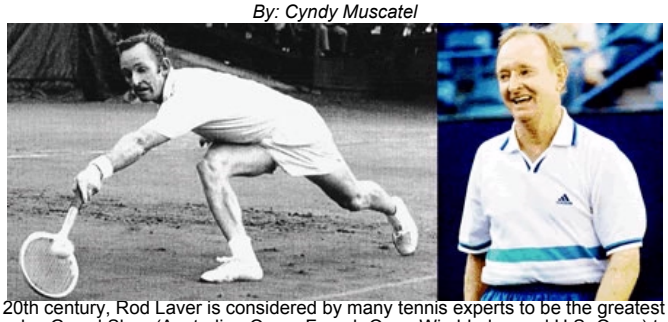
Eisenhower Helps the “Rocket” Soar High

an interview with tennis pro Rod Laver

By: Cyndy Muscatel



Voted as one of the best tennis players of the 20th century, Rod Laver is considered by many tennis experts to be the greatest to ever play the game. In fact, he is the only player in tennis history to win the singles Grand Slam (Australian Open, French Open,Wimbledon and U.S. Open) twice, once in 1962 and once in 1969.

Aside from his innate talent for hitting a tennis ball over a net, the “Rocket” – as he was called as a scrawny teen growing up in the Australian bush – was also known for his willingness to work hard to achieve his goals.

The former Rancho Mirage resident continues to bring that same level of diligence to reaching his objectives today, most recently in his recuperation from a total knee replacement performed at Eisenhower Medical Center in June of this year.

On a recent visit to the charming Carlsbad home that he shares with his wife, Mary, my husband and I – long-time friends of the Lavers – sat down and talked with Rod about his recent experience with joint replacement.

“You’re the poster boy for joint replacement,” my husband joked. assets/news/story/cfhlimages/200509/coverstory2.gif

It had only been four weeks since the surgery, but remarkably,Rod walked unaided.A walker sat against the wall, gathering dust.A cane, discarded,hung on the edge of the kitchen counter.

“I’m actually bionic,” Rod said. “Dr. Adrian Graff-Radford [Orthopedic Surgeon,Eisenhower Medical Center] did my left hip in 1996.Now, he’s done my right knee.”

“How’s the knee?”my husband asked.Although it sounded like a polite question, it was really one of self-interest – he needs a replacement, himself.

“The one surprise is the recovery has moved along so quickly,” Rod patted his knee. “I was four days in the hospital.Immediately, they have your leg working in a machine, keeping it mobile.”

Rod admits, however, that those first days were a little painful. “The nurses and doctors monitored me all the time.They wanted me to take the pain medication every four hours, not to let the pain get out of control,” he remembered.

A winner of 20 major tennis titles, Rod could have gone anywhere for surgery. He chose Eisenhower Medical Center.

assets/news/story/cfhlimages/200509/coverstory3.gif “First, I knew I wanted Dr.Adrian Graff-Radford to operate on me. I have such confidence in his ability, and he’s on the cutting edge of what’s new,”Rod explained.“Also, Eisenhower Medical Center is so well known,so respected. I’ve had other experiences there and always had wonderful care, from the operating room to the hospital room. The nursing staff is terrific, and the conditions in the hospital are always first rate.”

Ironically, Rod never experienced knee problems during his career.

“I hobbled around with my hip a bit too long. It was significantly arthritic – bone on bone – and extremely painful. Once I had had it replaced, I was able to resume all my previous activities, including playing tennis again. My knee became increasingly more deformed and painful,” Rod explained. “For a while, I wore a brace which straightened the knee, so I could play tennis.”

But, it reached a point that, even in his sleep, it would hurt and awaken him. “It got to the point that I was always worrying – will it hurt the next time I put my foot down? You start anticipating the pain,” Rod added.

For two weeks after the surgery, Rod took the blood thinner,Coumadin®, and then, two aspirins a day for two weeks. “The doctors don’t want blood clotting,but I’d had a stroke in 1998…so I had some concerns. I went over all the aspects of it with Adrian before the surgery,” he said.

“The knee replacement that I used on Rod Laver is called a CR-Flex, which I feel is designed for more flexion,” explained Dr. Graff-Radford, “and also because the posterior cruciate ligament, which connects the center of the tibia to the center of the femur, is retained, giving it more rotational stability.” Modern day knee and hip replacements should last about 20 to 25 years.

Completely recovered, the stroke is behind him.What’s ahead is physical therapy for his knee. No stranger to working towards a goal, he’s in training to get the result he wants. “They say it takes six months before it’s ‘your’ knee again,” Rod explained. “It’s refreshing to tackle something like this.”

Rod is concentrating on building up muscle strength and getting the bend back into the knee. “I overdid it a bit yesterday. I walked to the pool down the street, walked in the pool, and then back. I’ve had some pain since,” he admitted. “I want to work the muscle, but I don’t want to tear anything or cause any inflammation.”

Fishing off the coast of California

“There’s my real reason for doing the surgery,” Rod smiled quickly. Coming out of the house, his granddaughter, Riley, ran towards us. “Riley’s nearly five, and wants to learn how to play tennis. I’d like to be able to teach her,” Rod confided.

“I love my home life. I lived out of a suitcase for a long time. It was good to have done it,” Rod added.“But, it becomes a little tough.”Now, he loves playing golf and recreational tennis, fishing, landscaping and tending his garden, and working on the computer digitizing old movie footage.

“It’s quite uncanny. We have all these surgeries keeping us virtually out of wheelchairs. And they’re done everyday. They’re quite commonplace,” Rod explained. “It’s pretty amazing how far medicine has come in today’s world. I’m going to get back…and be better than ever!”

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