

The Boston Globe

Tennis Hall of Fame removes Bob Hewitt

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| GLOBE STAFF

NOVEMBER 15, 2012

Bob Hewitt held a plaque from his induction into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I. in 1992.



Disgraced tennis star Bob Hewitt was suspended indefinitely from the International Tennis Hall of Fame Thursday, following a lengthy investigation into allegations that he sexually abused underage girls he coached, from Greater Boston to his South African homeland, from the 1970s to the early 1990s.

The Hall of Fame stopped short of expelling Hewitt, one of the greatest doubles players in tennis history, because he has not been convicted of a crime, according to executive director Mark Stenning.

But Stenning said more than 25 members of the Hall's executive committee voted unanimously to suspend Hewitt because of the sexual abuse scandal.

"As of today, his plaque will be removed from the Hall of Fame," Stenning said. "His name will be removed from our website and all other materials, and from the perspective of the Hall of Fame, he ceases to be a Hall of Famer."

Hewitt's ouster ends decades of inaction by the international tennis community, particularly in South Africa, where officials acknowledged they were long ago informed of the allegations against him.

The Hall of Fame, in Newport, R.I., launched the investigation after the Globe last year published the results of a six-month investigation into Hewitt that involved dozens of interviews in the United States and South Africa. Six women publicly identified themselves as Hewitt's alleged victims, and numerous others who were cited as possible victims either declined to be interviewed or could not be reached.

"This is an awesome day," Suellen Sheehan said tearfully by phone from South Africa. She said she was 12 when Hewitt first had sex with her after a coaching session. "The liberation I feel right now is indescribable, and the emotion is overwhelming."

Hewitt's removal came more than a year after the Hall responded to the Globe report by announcing it would investigate the allegations. As it turned out, several months passed before

the Hall hired Michael J. Connolly, a former federal prosecutor and a partner in the Boston-based law firm of Hinckley Allen and Snyder, to lead the inquiry.

Connolly, by all accounts, conducted an exhaustive investigation, including recently spending 10 hours on Labor Day interviewing Hewitt in Boston. Stenning and Christopher Clouser, the Hall's chairman, also traveled to South Africa to interview Hewitt.

"In the beginning, we were slow to start because this was entirely unprecedented ground for us," Stenning said. "But we didn't take the matter lightly. We expended tremendous resources and time on it and feel comfortable that we have done the right thing."

In a letter that went out to every member of the Hall of Fame, Stenning described the suspension as "the appropriate course of action for the Hall of Fame, for the women who have made these allegations, and our sport."

South Africa's national prosecutor is in the midst of a months-long investigation of Hewitt, and earlier this month, the South African Police Services made a public appeal for anyone with information about the allegations against him to come forward.

Peter Van Niekirk, a lawyer representing several of Hewitt's alleged victims, said Thursday from Johannesburg about the status of the investigation, "I understand there have been developments and he is going to be criminally charged."

He had no additional information, and attempts by the Globe to reach the national prosecutor were unsuccessful.

Hewitt, 72, who also could not be reached, generally denied the allegations in an interview with the Globe last year in rural Addo, South Africa. But he made several potentially incriminating comments, including, "I just want to forget about it," in regard to his relationship with one of his accusers, Heather Crowe Conner.

Conner, a Topsfield Girl Scout at the time, said she had just turned 15 in 1976 when Hewitt had sex with her outside Masconomet Regional High School. Hewitt began coaching Conner at a club in Danvers soon after his career with the Boston Lobsters pro team was shortened by an injury.

Conner, now a teacher at Reading Memorial High School, filed a report with the Topsfield Police more than two years ago accusing Hewitt of raping her. She also reported the allegations in 2010 to the Hall of Fame as well as the US Tennis Association and Women's Tennis Association. She had been dismayed until Thursday that none had taken action against Hewitt.

"I am thankful the Hall stood strong for decency and have made him be held accountable for his actions and for the lifelong damaging effect and robbing young girls of their innocence," Conner said.

A leading advocate for Conner and the other victims applauded the Hall's action.

"Their suspension of Hewitt is an encouraging sign that organizations serving youth are taking to heart lessons learned from the Catholic Church, Penn State, and Boy Scouts scandals," said Jetta Bernier, director of MassKids, which works to end child sexual abuse. "The HOF's decision

reflects the overwhelming public sentiment that protecting children must always trump concerns about loss of institutional reputation, power, and money.”

In the months after the Globe report, members of the tennis community slowly began to express outrage. Notable among them was Billie Jean King, an inductee and life trustee of the Hall of Fame who partnered with Hewitt in 1970 to win the mixed doubles title at the French Open.

“I’m very upset, and he needs to be in jail,” King told the Washingtonian magazine in June. “If he’s guilty, which it looks like he is, he should be on trial. Of course, he’s innocent until proven guilty.”

Connolly made two detailed presentations to the Hall’s executive committee before the panel voted to suspend Hewitt. He had interviewed several dozen individuals, including several of the alleged victims on the condition the sessions remained confidential.

“The importance of the investigation was magnified by the gravity of the harm that was reported to us by very mature women who were young girls when these events occurred,” Connolly said.

Chief among the evidence against Hewitt are several handwritten love letters he allegedly sent to one of his students, Twiggy Tolken. Tolken, who said Hewitt became sexually involved with her when she was 12, provided copies of the letters to the Globe and the Hall of Fame.

One letter ended with an urgent instruction: “P.S. — Destroy this and the last [letter] NOW. I love you, BOB.”

Stenning said Connolly hired a handwriting analyst to examine the letters before he presented his findings to the executive committee. Connolly said the analysis was no longer necessary after Hewitt acknowledged writing the letters.

“He ruined way too many young girls,” Tolken, now a 43-year-old mother of two in Auckland, New Zealand, said last year. “He should go from the Hall of Fame to the Hall of Shame.”