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Alumni Profiles

*“I never learned
to say no.”*



HER DAY ON COURT

*Belle Farrar Theobald '44,
a groundbreaking tennis athlete
opened doors for women*

Belle Farrar Theobald '44 says she never felt like a pioneer. Times, after all, were different. It was wartime, so for a young woman to find herself in a graduating class of 10 men and six women was less unusual than it might otherwise be.

As for becoming the first female athlete at the University of Buffalo to play on an intercollegiate level – well, most of the men were fighting overseas. It was only natural that the lifelong tennis player would join the men's team, playing two seasons and holding her own on the courts against top-flight opposition.

Pioneer? Not to hear her tell it.

“The Law School would like to give special recognition to Belle Theobald as a long-time donor. Scholarships and on-campus jobs helped support her education at UB, and for this reason she gives back to help others. We are very grateful for her gifts.”

—Makau Mutua, interim dean

“I just loved the game. I always went out and played with the guys,” says Theobald, who at 86 still knows her way around a tennis court. “I loved the game so much I used to sleep with a racquet under my pillow.”

On Oct. 5, Theobald was one of seven individuals inducted into the UB Athletics Hall of Fame. She received the Pioneering Award, which honors “the accomplishments of outstanding participants during the years in UB history that women were not given an outlet for their athletic ability.”

Theobald was a hometown girl who moved from Maine as a child and grew up playing on the municipal courts of Niagara Falls. She won that city’s championship, as well as titles in Buffalo and southern Ontario, and was part of a doubles team that won the national public parks doubles tournament.

She was an undergraduate studying political science when the University summoned her to fill out a war-depleted men’s tennis team. In that first match, she won, helping UB to defeat the University of Rochester. She competed on the 1940 tennis team

that compiled a 2-3 record and on the 1941 squad that lost only one match and won seven. She played mostly sixth singles that first year, then second and third singles and second doubles in 1941.

Even though one player from Hobart College refused to play her, “to me it was just fun,” she says. “I just loved tennis.” She lost her husband in December 2006, but eight of her 10 children, and five of 20 grandchildren, were present when she received her award in October.

At UB Law School, “I hit those books like crazy,” Theobald says. At first she worked the graveyard shift at a defense plant, until a sympathetic dean got her a job as a proctor at the law library. She lived not far from what is now the UB South Campus, and took the trolley downtown to West Eagle Street for her law classes. After graduation, she went into the

Her musically talented family was even featured on a Merv Griffin television show called *One in a Million*. She earned a private pilot’s license.

She also worked for a decade as a taxpayer service representative for the Internal Revenue Service – often tackling the tougher questions that came in. “They would just give you guidelines. I would get my books out and research it more completely,” she says.

And she did a little traditional lawyering as the need arose – defending her kids in minor scrapes with the law, writing the leases for properties the family owned, advocating for a fair settlement when their home was claimed by eminent domain.

“I never learned to say no,” Theobald admits. “I did not do much in law, but it opened the door for me. Because you have more education, you are always asked to do things.”



Warde J. Manuel, Division I Director of Athletics, presents Belle Theobald with a letter sweater at the University at Buffalo Alumni Association’s Athletic Hall of Fame dinner.

Army as a legal affairs officer, rotating through bases in Maryland, Georgia, Virginia and New Jersey, advising newly discharged soldiers on their legal issues, and winning the Army women’s tennis crown in 1946. After her own discharge in 1947, she took her GI Bill benefits to Columbia University, where she earned a master’s degree in public administration. She also did coursework toward a Ph.D. in political science at Rutgers University.

Theobald ended up living outside Asbury Park, N.J., raising her family and pursuing all sorts of projects. She served for many years on her local board of education, including a stint as president. She joined the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Mayflower Society.

