



LEADER IN SQUASH: Illig was president of the men's division of the College Squash Association.

TRIBUTE

John Illig '86: Coach, Writer, Outdoorsman

John Illig was a boisterous evangelist for the oeuvre of the late David Foster Wallace; he sent copies of Wallace's books to friends, spammed our email inboxes with links to his essays, and annually harangued me to set aside a summer to wade through Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. So in late July, as I rode an escalator out of the Washington, D.C., Metro, I thought of John when I saw a young woman, dressed for what might have been her first job, carrying a copy of that very book. I imagined she was a recent Middlebury College graduate, a member of one of the squash teams John so masterfully coached, marching through the giant novel at his insistence. I wish I had stopped her so we could have made the connection and punched up John's number on one of our phones to let him know. He would have loved it.


A week later, John had died.

Having been the bearer of the tragic news of John's death to much of the squash community, as well as to the friends John and I shared growing up in Rochester, I found myself in the best place to be in the wake of his passing: on a squash court, teaching a group of kids many of the techniques John had taught me. A member of the varsity tennis and squash teams as a student at Rochester, John pursued a career as a tennis and squash coach that lasted 23 years, taking him to Colby and Bates Colleges, and then to Middlebury in 2007. Last year, he was named president of the men's division of the College Squash Association.

I set my racquet aside and told the kids about John. I told them about the rare amalgam of exuberance, thoughtful consideration and insight

that made John such a brilliant teacher, and about his delight in finally meeting Lolly, the woman of his characteristically unbounded dreams, whom he married two years ago.

John majored in English at Rochester and spent summers during his youth at a wilderness camp in the Adirondack Mountains. He wrote extensively about his love of hiking and the majesty of the outdoors. His published accounts of his travels along the great trails of North America—the Appalachian, the Pacific Crest, and the Continental Divide—reveal his insatiable curiosity, his determination to complete a task, and his infectious sense of humor, especially in regard to himself. John had been working on a novel at the end of his life.

Although we communicated frequently, the last time I actually saw John was at the women's college squash championships at Yale, about a year and a half ago. He was busy coaching, but as he descended from the gallery to advise one of his athletes between games, John stopped and called back to me "Hey, how's the writing going?" In the midst of a critical moment, and completely out of context, something had reminded him that I was beginning a big project, inspired, in no small way, by his own published work. This, ultimately, was the thing about John: he wanted us all to know, with the entirety of his great enthusiasm, that he remembered what each of us wanted to be when we grew up.  —JIM MOORE

Moore is a teacher and squash coach at Blair Academy in New Jersey. His daughter, Emma, is a member of the College Class of 2016.

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