

Head ski visionary also influenced the game of tennis

By Bill Simons, Inside Tennis

It's easy to dismiss New Jersey as some kind of Turnpike ride gone wrong (with too many Sopranos, oil refineries and Jersey Shore types). But before you do, remember this place is some kind of magnet for whizzes. Think Thomas Edison – the greatest inventor ever; a beloved frizzy-haired fellow named Einstein; and then there's a lesser-known bald guy named Howard Head, who transformed the sport of tennis as much as anyone.

In 1976, Head, an inspired innovator who said that sports equipment always had to feel right, had already invented the laminated ski, which rendered the clumsy, old hickory skis obsolete and revolutionized the sport. But the visionary – wealthy and retired – wanted to rev up his tennis game. So he got himself a ball machine and started to blast away. Unfortunately, many of his forehands landed in the next county. Something was wrong. Something had to be done.

For starters, he bought Prince Manufacturing, which made his semi-primitive ball machine. An inspired entrepreneur, he would morph Prince into one of the iconic names in international sports. He began by tweaking the motor on a household vacuum to produce the first commercially successful tennis ball machine. That was mere prologue. Almost immediately, Head grasped that little user-resistant wood rackets were far too frustrating. They twisted too much. And then came his Eureka moment. In a hot flash, he awoke one night, realizing that rackets needed to be bigger and have a far bigger sweet spot that wasn't exactly in the middle of the frame. Wow!

Read the whole story