

A lifetime of experiences prepared Jamea Jackson to be ASU women's tennis coach

Jackson is in first year, replacing Sun Devil legend Sheila McInerney

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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It was August, 2009. A Tuesday, Jamea Jackson thinks.

Jackson, Arizona State University's new women's tennis coach, had decided to retire from the Women's Tennis Association Tour in part because of a recurring hip injury.

She wasn't sure what was next. She had been playing professionally for six years, and at the age of 23, thought her career was still young.

The next day she got a phone call from Oklahoma State University tennis coach Chris Young. He asked Jackson if she would be interested in an undergraduate position on the Cowboys' coaching staff.

That sounds great, Jackson said.

Young arranged for the university to buy Jackson a one-way ticket to Tulsa, whose airport is 79 miles from Stillwater (which only has a regional airport).

One way?

Women's Tennis spring schedule

The Sun Devils will play their first Big 12 game vs. the University of Utah at home on Feb. 27.

Details:

4 p.m.

Whiteman Tennis Center, 800 E. 6th St., Tempe

[Check out the full schedule](#)

“We told her, ‘Come out and see if you like it, and if you do, we’ll need to get you enrolled in school,’” Young said. “We really didn’t know how long it would take to do all that, so we just kind of left it open-ended.”

Jackson arrived in Stillwater, met with Young and he asked her if she wanted the job.

“I was like, ‘Why not?’” Jackson said.

By that evening, she had rented an apartment in Stillwater, and her coaching career had begun.

“I realize now that’s not the normal way to do things,” Jackson said with a chuckle.

Maybe not, but ASU is thrilled that return flight was never booked.

A young start

Jackson’s resume illustrates why ASU chose her to replace legendary coach Sheila McInerney, who retired after 40 years leading the women’s tennis team.

In six years as a professional player, Jackson rose as high as No. 45 in the world rankings, captured 77 singles victories and represented the United States in the 2006 Fed Cup. After three years at Oklahoma State, she became a national coach for the United States Tennis Association and then head coach for two seasons at Princeton. She was named Ivy League Coach of the Year in 2024.

“When you look for coaches to play the sport at the highest level, she has a really interesting journey,” ASU Athletics Director Graham Rossini said after Jackson was hired in July 2024. “She went professional at 16, she’s competed against a lot of the women that are now at the top of their game of professional tennis... She’s like, ‘Oh, I know (that player). I beat her at the French Open or competed against her at Wimbledon.’ And she just has incredible tennis experience at a young age.”

That experience began when Jackson was 8 years old. By then, her athletic prowess was evident — a gift from her father, Earnest, who played six seasons in the NFL and twice was named a Pro Bowl running back.

Jackson’s mother, Ruby, recalled a contest among the first-grade students at Jackson’s elementary school in Atlanta to see who would run the furthest during the week. Jackson beat all the boys in her class. She started in the outfield for a boys T-ball team that went to a national tournament.

So when Jackson first swung a tennis racket, it was no surprise that she picked up the sport quickly. Her parents both played, were fans of Jimmy Connors, Arthur Ashe and John McEnroe, and often attended tennis fantasy camps.

"I got positive feedback and positive reinforcement from people around me who played," Jackson said. "From a very young age, I thought, 'Hey, I'm pretty good at this.' My dad was so athletic and fast, and I kind of got that from him. I believed I had something that stood out."

Said Earnest: "She was good at everything she tried."

Jackson also had a singular purpose once she started playing: Beat her brother, Jarryd, who is four years older.

"I don't want to put him on blast right now, but, yeah, I think I got better than him pretty quickly," Jackson said. "That was definitely a motivation for me. I wanted to beat him so, so badly. And as soon as I beat him, he kind of stopped taking it extremely seriously so he could say, 'I don't care.'"

To this day, Jackson said, Jarryd will send her videos of his form and ask, "What do you think of my forehand?"

"I'm like, 'Stop sending me videos, OK?'" Jackson said with a laugh.

She's competed against a lot of the women that are now at the top of their game of professional tennis.

Graham Rossini

ASU athletics director

Jackson got her big break when she was 11 years old. She won her age bracket in the American Tennis Association national tournament, and each winner of the ATA, which is the oldest African American tennis organization in the country, received a one-week scholarship to the prestigious Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida.

Jackson's family accompanied her over spring break, turning the scholarship into a family vacation, and no one was sure what to expect when they got there.

On the first day, Jackson and other players in her age group began practicing on a back court at the academy. After about 30 minutes, a coach told Jackson to accompany him to the main court. Her parents, having lunch, saw their daughter get onto a golf cart and thought she was hurt.

Instead, the coach had told Bollettieri he should take a look at Jackson.

“So I started hitting there for about 10 minutes, and then Nick comes out and watches me hit,” Jackson said. “I’m like, ‘This is crazy.’ And when my parents showed up, Nick walks over, grabs us all, sits us down all together and takes his glasses off.”

Bollettieri’s words stunned Jackson.

“I think you can be a pro,” he told Jackson. “I think you can be top 10. I think you could be number one in the world.”

Bollettieri offered Jackson a full scholarship. It was the first time Jackson thought tennis could be her career. Fifteen months later, the family relocated to South Florida.

“We couldn’t believe it,” Ruby said. “Jamea was so happy. And that’s where she stayed until she turned pro.”

Filling big shoes

Jackson was interested in the ASU job after hearing that McInerney was retiring, but she also was hesitant.

McInerney was an icon in the Sun Devils’ athletic department and in the collegiate tennis world, having coached 49 All-Americans and led ASU to 35 straight NCAA tournament appearances.

There’s a saying in the world of athletics: You don’t want to be the coach who follows the legend. You want to be the coach who follows that coach.

“I got a lot of texts from people who were like, ‘Are you sure you want to do this? Those are some pretty big footsteps to fill,’” Jackson said.

Jackson, however, had spent her whole life seeking challenges. She wasn’t about to let fear dissuade her from applying for the job.

What she didn’t know is that, in Tempe, a persuasive voice was advocating for her hiring.

“They had a list of probably five or six coaches that I thought would have been fantastic, and Jamea was at the top of the list for sure,” McInerney said.

McInerney was impressed with Jackson's playing career, the job she did at Princeton and the connections she made at the USTA; connections, McInerney said, that could be valuable in recruiting. She also loved Jackson's infectious personality.

Jackson said that comes from her mother, whom she described as a "bubbly Southern girl" and having a smile that "just lights up a room."

"It's just a really good fit," McInerney said.

Jackson said her coaching philosophy was formed from her years at the USTA, being around "the best coaches who have worked with literally the best players in the world." She uses a "five Ps" system designed by Jose Higuera, who has coached, among others, Pete Sampras, Roger Federer and Jim Courier.

Jackson said the five Ps stand for patience, planning, periodization (a training plan to help players reach peak fitness), progressions (how a coach organizes practice) and the person.

"I don't know how good I was as a coach when I started, but I fell in love with it right away," Jackson said. "I found it very rewarding in a way that playing is not, being able to help young players develop."

And now that Jackson is here, leading the Sun Devils and loving the warm Valley weather, she can't imagine being anywhere else.

"I feel really blessed to be able to get up and go to work at a place that is all encompassing," she said. "I got lucky. Definitely."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Jamea Jackson, head coach for ASU Women's Tennis, poses for a portrait in studio on Jan. 30.
Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University