



The Rec Department; Tennis, any...everyone?

Author: MICHAEL O'CONNOR
Aug 1, 1999

Erika Baez is getting an education in tennis. And also in sportsmanship, confidence, honesty and other character-building traits.

The Roxbury 10-year-old is one of 800 city youths spending part of their summer learning to serve and volley at courts throughout the city, courtesy of the Boston Parks and Recreation Department, the Boston Tennis Coalition, and a program called Tenacity.

"It's a good program, I think," Erika said on a recent afternoon on the Boston Common courts with her four cousins and grandmother. "The instructors are good. You learn new things."

For most inner-city kids, tennis is a new thing indeed.

Long considered the province of the privileged, a game of country club suburbia, tennis is making inroads into some long-ignored demographics: minorities and the disadvantaged.

The Sportsman's Tennis Club on Blue Hill Avenue was for many years the sole outlet for inner-city enthusiasts. Slowly, those tennis opportunities are expanding.

Folks such as former tennis pro and management consultant Ned Eames and Longwood Cricket Club head pro Bud Schultz, co-founders of Tenacity, are working with city parks and recreation officials to bring the game to those who've never had a chance.

"Tenacity is an outgrowth of the Boston Tennis Council, which is a consortium of groups offering tennis to urban residents," said Eames. "We're determined to introduce this great game to as many people as possible, working through public-private partnerships and with the City of Boston."

Parks and recreation operations director Bill Linehan said cooperation among the agencies has helped the city expand its tennis offerings.

"Last year, I think we were at eight sites and now we're at more than a dozen, with a lot more kids involved," Linehan said. "Working with Tenacity, the effort is both grounded in the neighborhoods, but also able to reach the upper echelons of the sport."

"We have more connection to the game in general."

Indeed, through Eames' and Schultz' contacts, about half of the 250 youths who worked at the recent Davis Cup quarterfinals at Longwood were from Boston.

Also through that connection, U.S. players Pete Sampras and Todd Martin, and coach Tom Gullikson, made an appearance at the Boston Common courts during their local stay.

How many players at suburban clubs can say they learned how to stroke a backhand by Sampras?

West Roxbury's Santosh Ganesan, who was introduced to the game in his native India, nevertheless pronounced the city effort "a very good program. It's not too complex for the younger kids, and they can actually learn something," said Ganesan, 16, a youth instructor. "It's amazing what you can see in the kids from week to week."

Former Boston Latin player Daniel Welch noted that "for many of these kids, it's their first introduction to tennis. And there's a social aspect, as well. We try to pair them up with people they don't know, so they can make new friends, meet new people."

Or in the case of a group of boys and girls from the Chinatown Community Center, practice their language skills.

Warren Steele, a teaching pro and site director at the Common courts, noted: "They're learning English as well as tennis, and those girls from the Chinatown center are the most coachable I've ever seen in my career."

The tennis pro also noted that more than tennis basics are offered; life lessons are part of the package.

"The emphasis is on a lot more than the game itself," Steele said. "It's also about sportsmanship and developing the right attitude, learning confidence, and testing your character."

"Boy," he said with a chuckle, "when you have to call a ball in or out on your side of the court, that can be a real test."