

The Boston Globe

Tennis Thriving in New Neighborhoods

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By: Bud Collins

Lauren Maggio was battling Matthew Lombardi, and it was tight. They were 10-year-old rookies making their tournament debuts in the Mayor's Cup.

Sebastian Grosjean was battling Arnaud Clement, and it was tense. Not only was a semifinal slot in the US Pro Championships at stake yesterday, but these 21-year-olds were scrapping for French bragging rights at Longwood Cricket Club. It also meant something to their bank accounts and standing on the ATP (Association of Tennis Pros) Tour.

There was a lot of tennis going on in our town, from bottom to top.

ATP? To Lauren and Matthew, banging away at each other at Rogers Park in Brighton a few days ago, it might as well mean Anybody Trying, Playing. Or Athletic Time Pleasure. No prize money or computer points were involved in the Mayor's Cup, a city-wide kids tournament that concluded yesterday on Boston Common. But maybe some bragging rights.

Gert Maggio from West Roxbury was bragging - about tennis. She is Lauren's mother, and she says her daughter was quite unhealthy until taking up tennis this year. "Lauren had a dangerous cholesterol count, but it's gone down 100 points since she started playing," Mrs. Maggio said. "Her doctor is amazed."

Are we practicing medicine in this space?

No, just fun, which should be a leading product of the continuing revival of the game on public courts across the city. I keep waiting for erstwhile hacker Tom Menino to make his tennis comeback, and get rid of his golfer's waistline. But the fact of the Mayor's Cup, and his support for increasing the number of everybody's courts within his domain, make him aces to those of us who believe that young legs, hearts, and psyches will benefit from chasing fuzzy yellow balls. Better, too, than being chased by the fuzz.

Lauren Maggio and Matthew Lombardi couldn't shake each other. It was close, close, closer as they slapped and flailed, the novitiates, plunged into something very new and exciting as their parents sweated it out in the shade of huge maples behind the court.

"Matthew really feels good about himself and his new game," his mother, Sherie Lombardi of Brighton, was saying. "I think this is so

good for these kids."

Nobody beyond the families was much interested. Yet we'd better be. Not in the who-beat-whom stuff. There's enough of that on these pages where we probably go over-gaga for games played by over-compensated professionals.

But we'd better keep in mind that there ought to be more money spent to broaden kids' play, more attention given to putting more youngsters on courts, diamonds, fields, skates, in pools and all sorts of sporting programs. Of course the pros of whatever sport, from Red Sox to the nomads of tennis and golf, have their place. However, Boston's kids - the town's treasure and future - are more important than any pros you can name.

As far as tennis is concerned, a new tax-exempt organization called Tenacity has appeared to throw its weight into "bringing the game to every city neighborhood, all-year long." Those are the words of a founder, Bud Schultz, ex-touring pro and now the pedagogue of strokes at Longwood.

A variety of programs already exist beneath the umbrella of the Boston Tennis Council, presided over by Tom Desmond, who launched free lessons in Charlestown. Parks and Recreation and the Community Centers are in there. Best known is the Sportsmen's Tennis Club in Dorchester, a free and nominally-priced year-round operation.

"Tenacity has been formed," says executive director Ned Eames, also a founder, "to provide staff and expertise in tennis and after-school educational programs to every one of the present neighborhood locations, and to inaugurate more."

Says Boston Parks commissioner Justine Liff, "We're pleased to be teaming with Tenacity to make tennis a part of our children's lives."

It appears the kids will be lucky to have Tenacity tenacious on their behalf.

Anyway, Lauren and Matthew stayed neck-and-neck in their first-rounder, and moved into a decisive tie-breaker. She ran down a couple of lobs, punched a backhand or two, and then he hit a ball into the net. It was over. Her smile was as wide as the court as they shook hands. He didn't look devastated. They'd done fun together.

She showed up at Longwood, one of the kids the Boston Tennis Council brought to the US Pro. It was an eye-opener, beholding the game played at such a high-altitude level. But, wisely, Laurenn was more concerned with her own game. "I lost in the next round," she reported, "but I'll get better." She says she'll be practicing for the Mayor's Cup of 2000.

The day grew inclement but not before Arnaud Clement was inclement to his French pal, Sebastien Grosjean, 1-6, 6-4, 6-3. He takes the semifinal place in the US Pro that Grosjean occupied a year ago.

Rogers Park. Longwood. It was all tennis in our town, and Sebastien

Grosjean and Matthew Lombardi could pull themselves together and say,
"I'll be back. Look out next time!"