



THE REC DEPARTMENT; It takes a little Tenacity

Author: Michael O'Connor
Aug 5, 2001

Game. Set. Life.

That's the slogan on a poster hanging from the fence enclosing the Boston Common tennis courts, and if the youngsters swinging racquets don't pay much heed at first, that's OK because by the time their free tennis lessons are over, they'll have absorbed at least some of the message.

Tenacity is nothing if not tenacious.

In a pioneering effort with the Boston parks department, the privately operated Tenacity program is bringing to the city a sport that symbolizes the suburbs. Thousands of urban youngsters, kids and teenagers, are learning the basics of tennis, and in turn finding that the foundations of daily life - confidence, community, competition - aren't that much different.

"It's just really nice that a lot of these kids, who probably would never even be able to think about playing tennis, are now getting the chance," said site director Liz Hughes, who grew up playing at The Country Club in Brookline and at private school.

"This program is really helping them to see what else is out there," said Hughes, a student at Mount Holyoke College.

Added Cameron White, another staffer of the learn-to-play program: "It's great, because they're finding out how fun tennis is. They're learning a game that they'll be able to play all their lives."

Pierre Hage hopes he can become a lifer.

"I think I played once before," the 13-year-old West End resident said as he prepared to hit with instructor Marietta Papagapitus. "Now I'm finding out it's a lot of fun. I'm getting to play a lot here. It's nice to have this to do in the summer."

And in such a nice locale. The tennis lessons take place on courts surrounded by the tree-filled park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. The outer perimeter views feature everything from the State House to the Public Gardens.

But instruction is also taking place at more than 20 neighborhood sites, citywide, most of them schools and playgrounds.

Ned Eames, Tenacity director and a former standout player himself, said that in the program's three-year history, it has grown beyond the organizers' hopes. "We served about 1,200 kids our first year and this year we'll see about 2,200," Eames said. "There's an incredible amount of interest out there. And working with the city and our other partners has been of great benefit to all these young tennis players."

Eames and others expect to see some topnotch players developing in Boston over the next decade. And for inner-city kids especially, sports role models are important in developing the skills and aptitude for the sport. Did someone mention the Williams sisters?

To be sure, Venus and Serena have made their mark individually and collectively, both on the world tennis stage and at more modest centers such as the Sportsmen's Tennis Club. But they are not the sole reason most of Boston's younger players take up a racquet, Eames insisted.

"Yes, it's great to have them as role models and doing so incredibly well," the Tenacity director said. "But I have to say when we started we weren't sure what the response from the kids might be.

"What we've seen - it's really been an explosion - is that the interest is not coming from the top down, but from the ground up, from the kids themselves. They really love this game."

That certainly seemed to be the case over at the Common courts. Instructors by the net awaited a line of kids to hit balls to them. On another court, there was a lively volley going on. Plenty of energy. Lots of fun.

And the future? Look for the partnership between Tenacity and the City of Boston to expand further: They would like to again double their numbers, maybe to 5,000 within the next several years, and get more middle schools and more high schools involved.

"The interest is there," Eames said. "And we're going to go after it."

The Boston Parks and Recreation Department and Tenacity are conducting tennis lessons at more than 20 sites in the city through Aug. 17. From Aug. 18-24, the Mayor's Cup tournament will take place, culminating in the championship finals at the Carter Playground in Roxbury. Call (617) 635-4505, ext. 6201 for more information.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.